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THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE

SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE

From Software captures
the soul of the shinobi



NAME

David R.

OCCUPATION

Cardiothoracic Surgeon

GENRE

Shooters/Battle Royale

HANDLE

SurgeonSureShot007

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ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com
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It Makes You Think

Should a game from 2017 be the Game of the Year in 2018? This is the question we had to ask ourselves this year, because no one can deny the impact Fortnite had on 2018. It influenced pop culture like few other games. It got people flossing during the 7th-inning stretch at baseball games, had celebrities streaming, and made Ninja one of the world's biggest personalities. This year, Fortnite was everywhere.

Yes, I know Fortnite has its haters, and even though people at the *Game Informer* office play Fortnite, the game isn't a part of our daily lives like it is for so many. That doesn't change the fact that, in many ways, it was the biggest game of 2018.

Fortnite isn't the first game to have an impact that spans multiple years; just look at the staying power of GTA Online, League of Legends, or Overwatch. These are the kinds of challenges we think about here as we work on Top 50. We know the list works best when it concentrates on the new games in a given year. We love how it puts a spotlight on great games players may have missed, but it's hard to not pause and think about the increasing impact of games as live services. They may not be delivered as new packaged products each year, but they have changed the face of gaming.

For years (decades?), I have had World of Warcraft on my personal Top 10 list, even in years when a new expansion didn't hit, because Blizzard is always working on improving the world, and I like living in that world. Similarly, games like Fortnite can put out tons of new content in a year, yet not be considered for year-end lists because they don't technically receive a "new" release.

We tackled this conundrum on *The Game Informer Show* (our weekly podcast, which you can find on gameinformer.com), and looked for feedback from the readers. The results were clear: You thought the Top 50 should focus on new games that are changing the gaming landscape. In the end, we agree with you, and that's how we approached our list. But the more games change and the more they become destinations rather than discrete releases, what qualifies as a "new game" becomes more difficult to define.

Enjoy the issue.

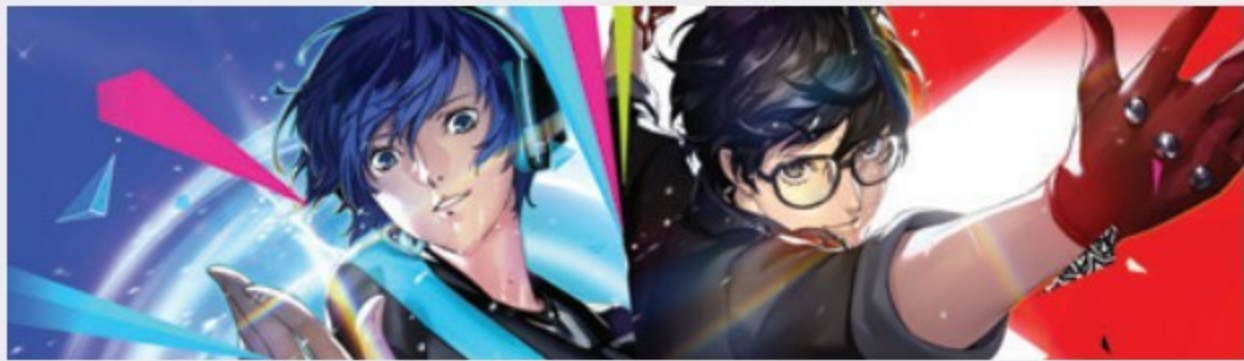
Cheers,

0219



20 Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice

From Software dabbles in the dark arts of ninjutsu with its latest action/RPG romp. We visited the studio and spoke with famed creator Hidetaka Miyazaki to learn more about the title. **by Daniel Tack**



08 Tailoring Persona's Signature Style
We spoke with the Persona series' art directors about fashion and why it has become such an integral facet of the franchise's dark world.



14 Interview:
Tetsuya Mizuguchi
Rez creator Tetsuya Mizuguchi on the art of bringing music to video games, Tetris Effect, and more.

34 The Top 50 Games Of 2018
2018 had some heavy hitters, like God of War, Red Dead Redemption II, and Spider-Man – and then there was that whole Fortnite situation. Read on to find out our favorites of the year.

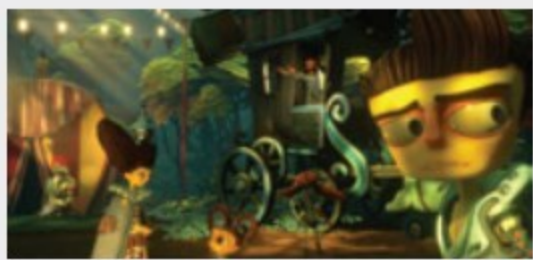
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The minds behind the original Fallout and New Vegas show off their new science-fiction universe.



69 Mortal Kombat 11
The hyper-violent fighter returns. This time, it involves time travel?



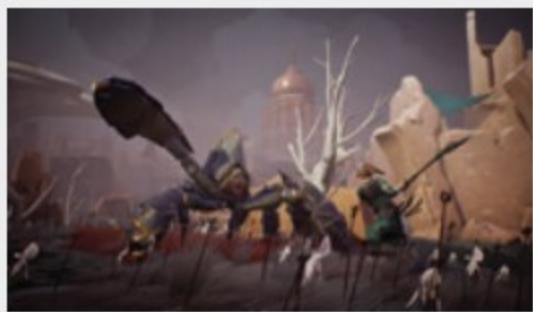
72 Psychonauts 2
The thoughtful platformer returns with a full on sequel, and we can't wait to go on another mind-bending adventure.



90 Super Smash Bros. Ultimate
Ultimate is a dangerous subtitle for any game, but this Smash Bros. lives up to it.



84 Below
The long-in-development Below has suddenly reappeared! Was it worth the wait?



85 Ashen
Ashen takes a lot of inspiration from Dark Souls, but it never quite hits the same highs.

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Times were a-changing this month, as readers reflected on a bygone genre, the blurring of game releases, and pivotal E3 news. Readers also raved about their favorite games – at least some things don't change!

RTS Revival?

I read the Warcraft III: Reforged cover story (issue 309), and I totally wish that more RTS games were still being made. When I was 14, I was in a computer club in middle school, and every Friday we would get together and play a bunch of random games. It was super fun, and basically every day I played the original Starcraft. It was so good and to this day is still one of my favorite games, even surpassing most of the big triple-A games that have come out recently. Rest assured, if Blizzard (or anyone else for that matter) was still making great RTS games, I would definitely be buying all of them.

Tayven Sudweeks
via email

If any game can test the viability of RTS games in the modern market, it's Warcraft III: Reforged. You can learn a ton more about the changes Blizzard has planned for the remake at gameinformer.com/warcraft3.

Sony A No-Show?

I just read that Sony will not be attending next year's E3. Wow, that feels like a big rip-off because one of my most anticipated games is The Last of Us Part II. Is this the first time Sony hasn't attended E3 in the almost 25 years that E3 has been around? I'm 17, so I've never seen anything like this since I've been alive. Do you guys have any idea why Sony did this?

Jeremy Gicheru
via email

Speaking of changing times... This is indeed the first time Sony hasn't participated in E3, and while some publishers have moved off-site (Microsoft) or focused on video presentations (Nintendo) in the past, Sony's announcement that it won't be holding a press conference of any kind does feel like the end of an era for E3. Considering Sony also didn't hold PlayStation Experience this year, we're guessing the publisher simply doesn't have enough new demos to show for its upcoming exclusives – and will probably opt for its own Sony-themed celebration when it does.

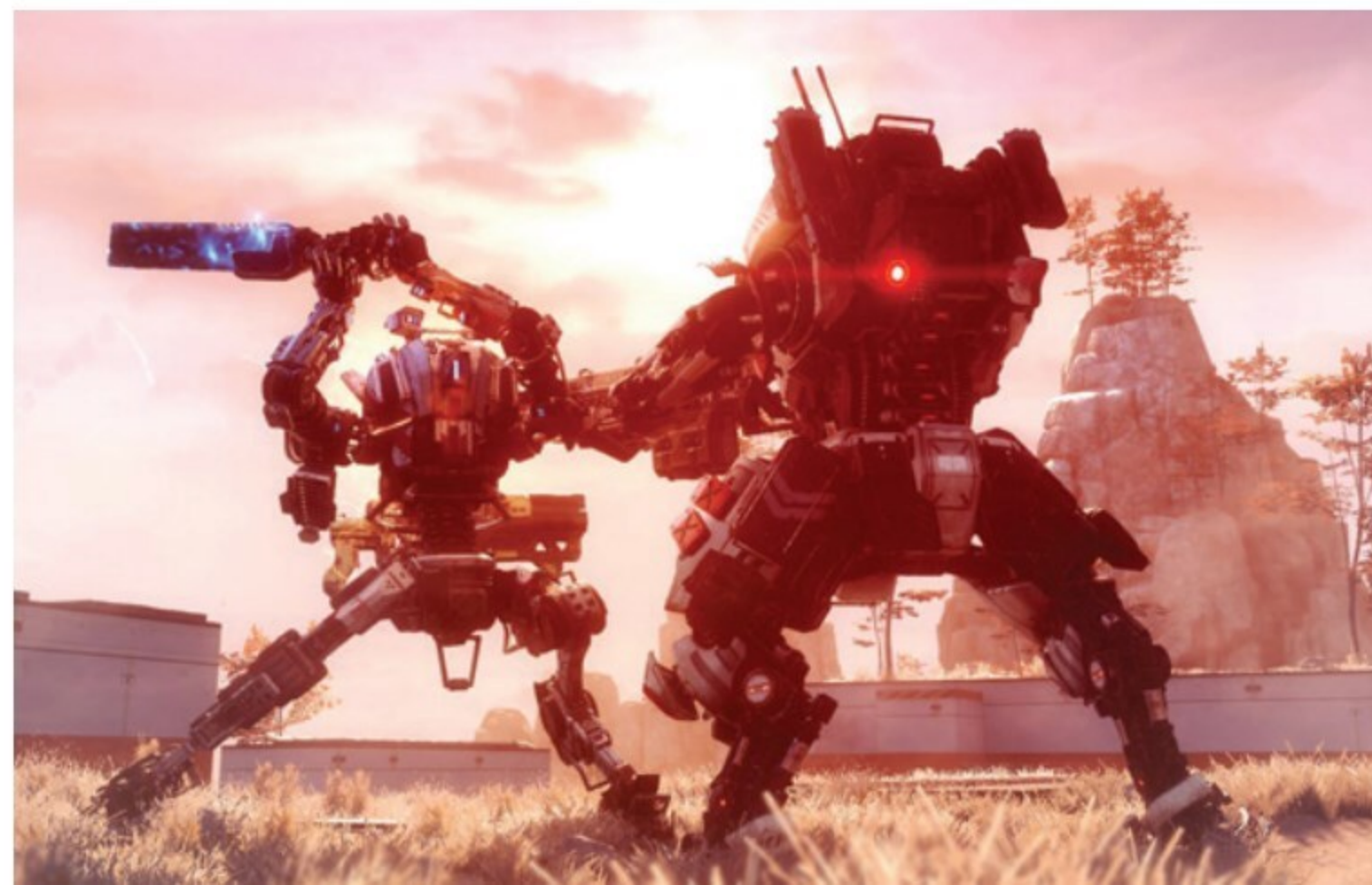
Still Loving Titanfall

I've been playing Titanfall 2 ever since a game-store clerk recommended it to me over two years ago. To me it's one of the best games I've ever played! However, I would love to see new maps, titans, and maybe weapons

added to the game. Do you guys see Respawn and EA getting back together to make a Titanfall 3, or even some more DLC for Titanfall 2?

Paul Waller
via email

Respawn actually did add new maps, titans, weapons, and even game modes to Titanfall 2 throughout 2017, all of which were free to all players – a fact the EA haters may want to remember from time to time. You don't have to worry about EA and Respawn getting “back” together, though – the publisher bought Respawn in late 2017, at which time they announced they were working on another mainline Titanfall game. Whether that has taken a backseat to Respawn's Star Wars game remains to be seen, but either way, fans of the studio have plenty to be excited about.



Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!



One Server To Rule Them All

How has no studio managed to create a single, persistent online server in which *all* players of a game occupy the same world space? I understand that there are obvious technical obstacles here, but shouldn't people be trying to figure out how to get us ever closer to something like the world of *Ready Player One*? Imagine *Fallout 76* in this way! When do you think this could happen?

Thomas Wilson
New York City, NY

Dismissing the technical obstacles for a truly shared, single-instance video game world is a bit like shrugging off the hurdles involved with time travel – there's a reason no one has done it yet, and that's because it's *really* difficult. Currently, the closest example to what you're looking for would be *EVE Online*, but even that has its limitations. When someone will finally figure out a viable solution is anyone's guess, but we're betting it ain't going to be Bethesda. Although, if the developer doesn't fix *Fallout 76*'s problems soon, the remaining player base might actually fit on a single server.

It's...Complicated

I wanted to share my thoughts about Fortnite being considered for Game of the Year. I love Fortnite and am an avid player and fan, but I'm curious as to why an early access game that hasn't even been officially released would be eligible for Game of the Year. I feel the award should go to a game and studio that is willing to give us a full game, and not keep it in early access for over a year. Is this a precedent? Are betas going to be GotY contenders from here on out?

Alec Fitzgerald
via email

With all the talk about games as service and Game of the Year awards, I heard zero talk about Fortnite being in the conversation. It has easily been the most popular and honestly best-supported title out there – at least the battle royale version (they seem to have forgotten *Save the World*). With how many people play this game and how it has pervaded popular culture, how is it not in more GotY conversations? I love *Red Dead 2*, *Spider-Man*, and *God of War*, but I can't help but feel Fortnite deserves to at least be in the conversation.

Elliott Smith
Lynchburg, Virginia

We discussed the challenges that ongoing games like Fortnite present to the Top 50 in a recent episode of *The G.I. Show*, and the response from listeners was loud and clear: We should keep the live-service games off the main list. While we're sticking to our traditional approach this year, we certainly don't fault anyone who considers Fortnite their favorite game of 2018 – and we know the lines will only continue to blur moving forward. As for the "early access" issue – Epic clearly doesn't put a lot of stock into the label, so we don't either.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Will the digital version of *G.I.* come to Switch? If not, will the Labo fax machine be able to print out the physical magazine?"

In order: No, and we sure as heck hope so!

"Gun to your head, would you pick *Fallout 76* or *Metal Gear Survive* to play exclusively for the next 12 months?"

We choose the "gun to your head" option.

"Will this era of micro-transactions ever end?"

Yes, but the replacement will be SO much worse.

Best Feedback Letter Intended For Customer Support:

"We Never ordered this book!! We are 56 years old and have nothing to do with this crazy stuff!!"

Question Of The Month:

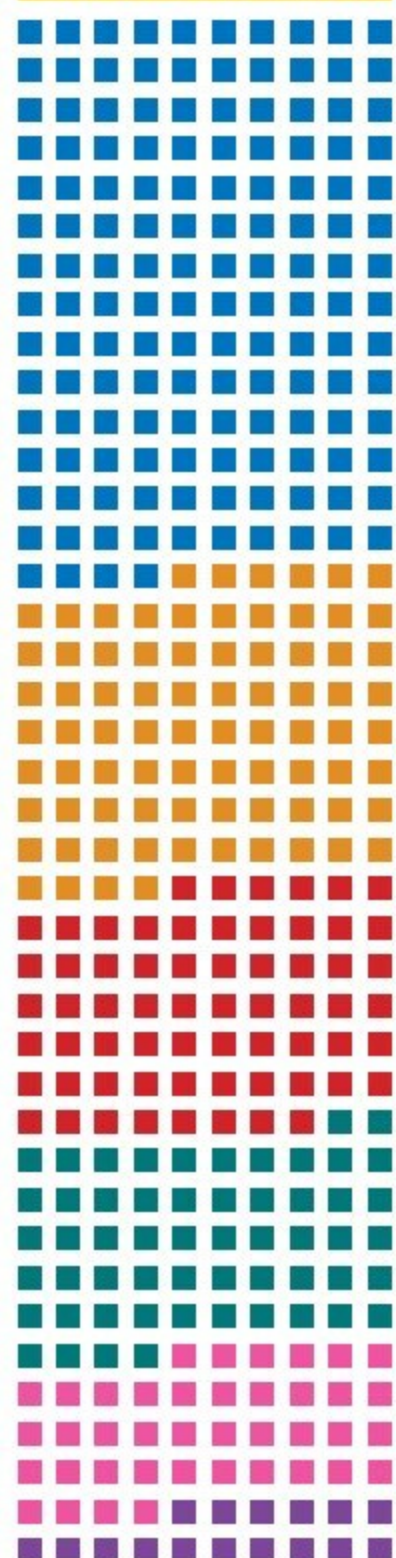
It's time for the only logical follow-up question to this month's Top 50: Which call did we absolutely blow, and why?

gi spy



(Left) This month we traveled to Tokyo, Japan, to learn all about From Software's *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*. Hidetaka Miyazaki sacrificed Suriel on the office bonfire, which was weird. **(Right)** Shea got the lowdown on *Far Cry New Dawn* this month from Ubisoft Montreal's Isaac Papismado, JS Decant, and Olivia Yassi-Alexander.

On Your Mind



- Best of 2018 Picks
- "GotY Better Not Be Fortnite!"
- "GotY Should Be Fortnite!"
- Digital Archaeologists Appreciation
- PlayStation Classic Disappointment
- Merit Badge Seekers



The Big Question

In issue 308, we asked readers what their favorite game of 2018 is. While not terribly surprising, the varied responses serve as a reminder of what a truly great year this has been for gaming.

My pick is Insomniac's Spider-Man. Why? When you get a visually stunning game where you can shoot sticky-white grappling ropes out of your wrists and then swing through a massive city, it simply becomes your favorite game.

Isaiah Alexander

My favorite game of 2018 is Fortnite – I know it came out a year ago, but it blew up this year. I've spent around \$200 on battle royale, plus another \$100 on Save The World. I could list a million reasons why I love it, but I don't want this to be too long.

Brody Clark

Assassin's Creed Odyssey. I've been an AC fan since the very first game. I love history, and having an easily accessible playground that spans all of my favorite time periods makes me ecstatic about each new release. AC Origins' recreation of Ancient Egypt was electrifying. How Ubisoft managed to beat it with Odyssey's take on Greece will never cease to baffle me. It surpassed all my expectations.

Demitri Alan

I wasn't sure I was going to buy Read Dead Redemption II, even though I loved the first game. After reading your coverage, I decided to, and I am so glad I did. I am breathing, sleeping, and sweating RDR II. A month and who knows how many hours in, and I'm still in Chapter 4. I can't even remember why I was on the fence now, but it is best game ever, never mind the best game of 2018.

Luisa

(Left) Reiner caught up with Santa Monica Studio's Cory Barlog, actor Scott Porter, and Kinda Funny Games' Greg Miller during this year's The Game Awards. **(Right)** Reiner also got downright festive with Epic's Rohan Rivas and Jeremy Hoffmann.



WINNER

1 Nathan Grimes

For the record, we would totally play a Nintendo-themed co-op zombie shooter. Left 4 Toad?

2 David J. Riley-Campbell

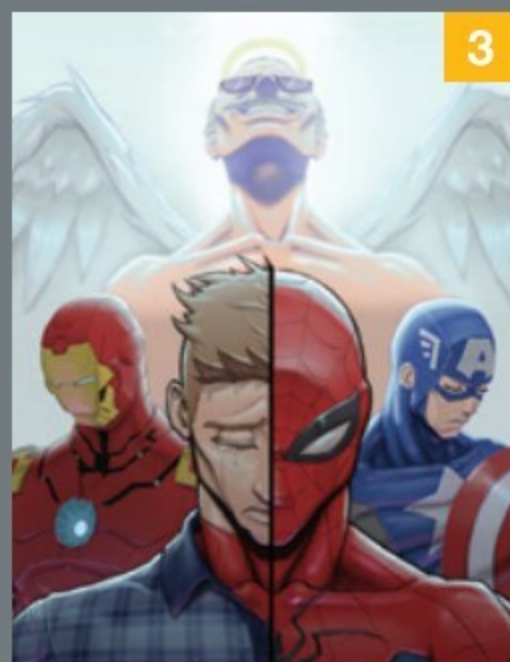
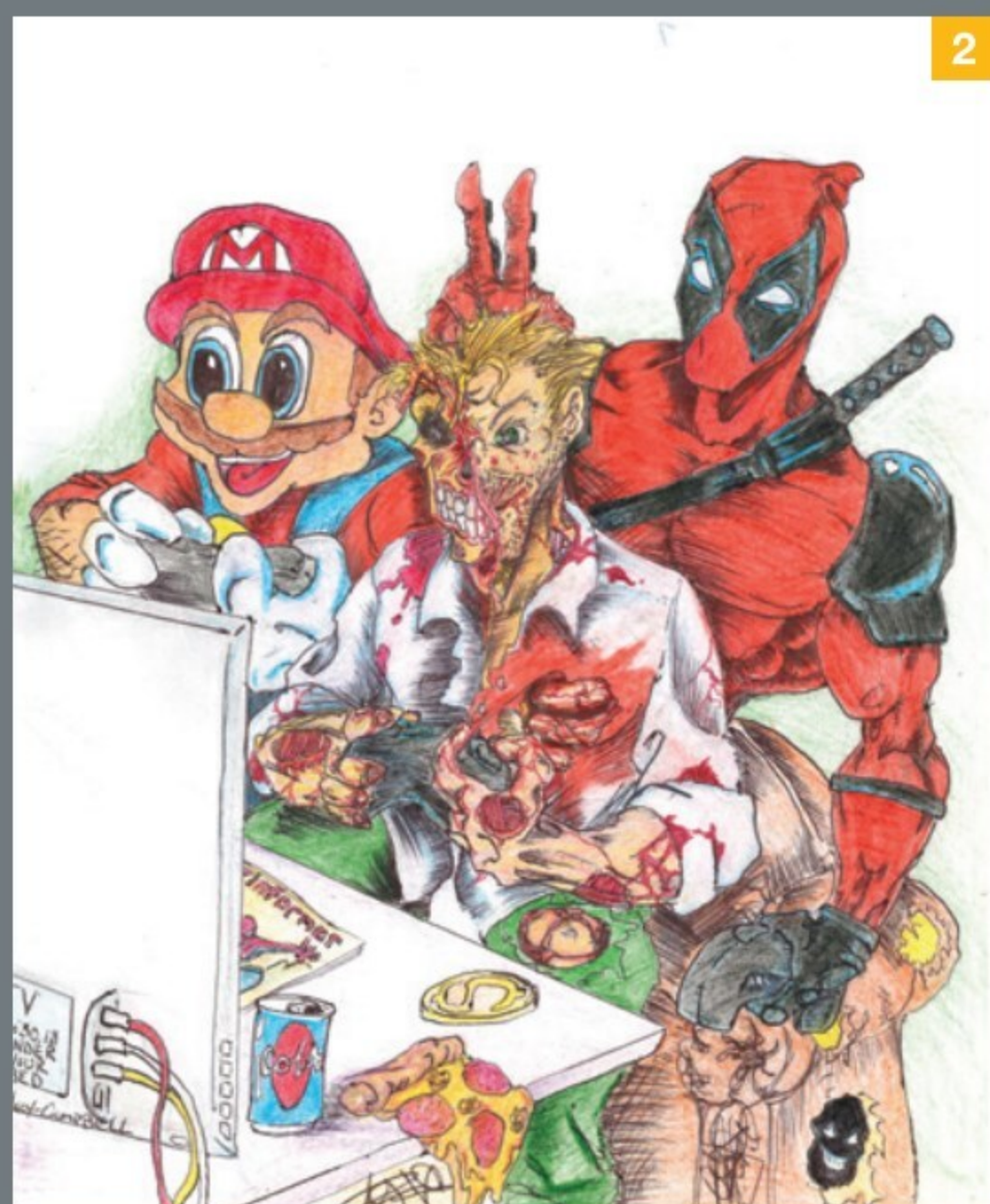
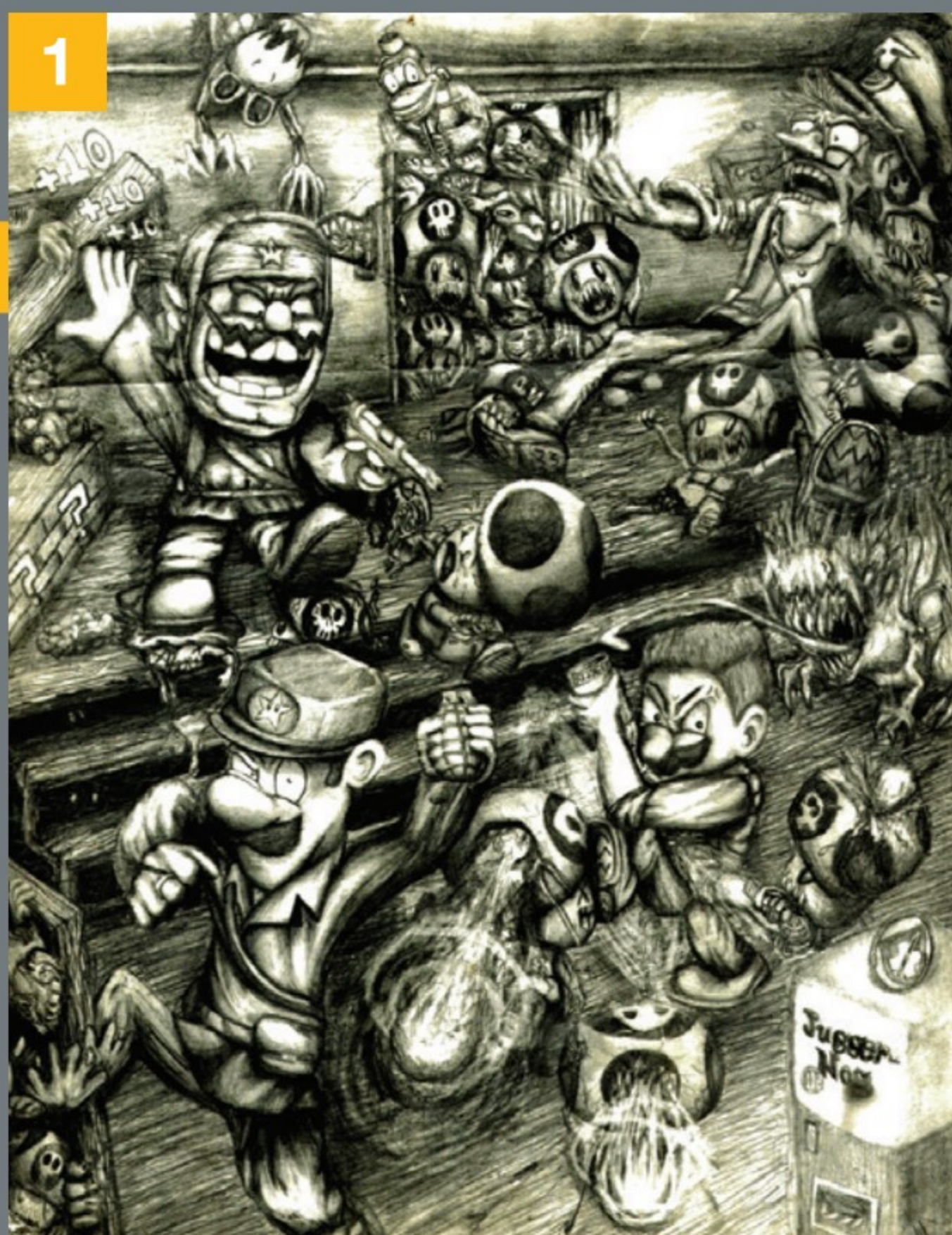
Wait a minute, is it Violent Mario Art month already? It sneaks up on us every year...

3 Jermaine Shannon

At least we can all take solace in the fact that Stan Lee will live on via countless CG cameos in Marvel films.

4 Kiera Fox, Age 9

This is exactly how every Smash Bros. match we play turns out. We're Toad in this scenario, if it wasn't obvious.



» Submit your art for a chance to win our monthly prize «

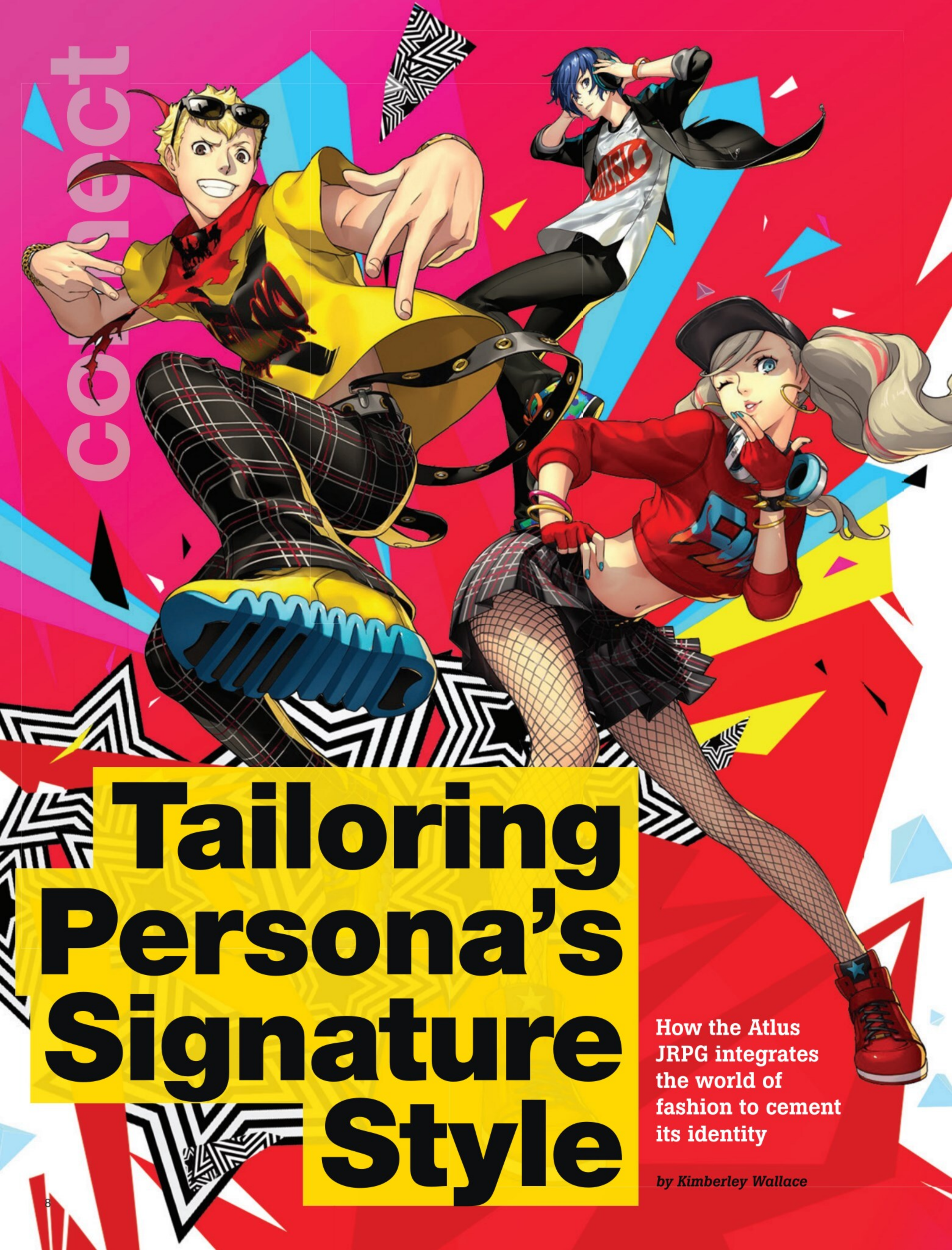
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(Left) Capybara Games' Kris Piotrowski stopped by the G.I. office this month to show us Below – and marvel over our copy of Metal Warriors, naturally.

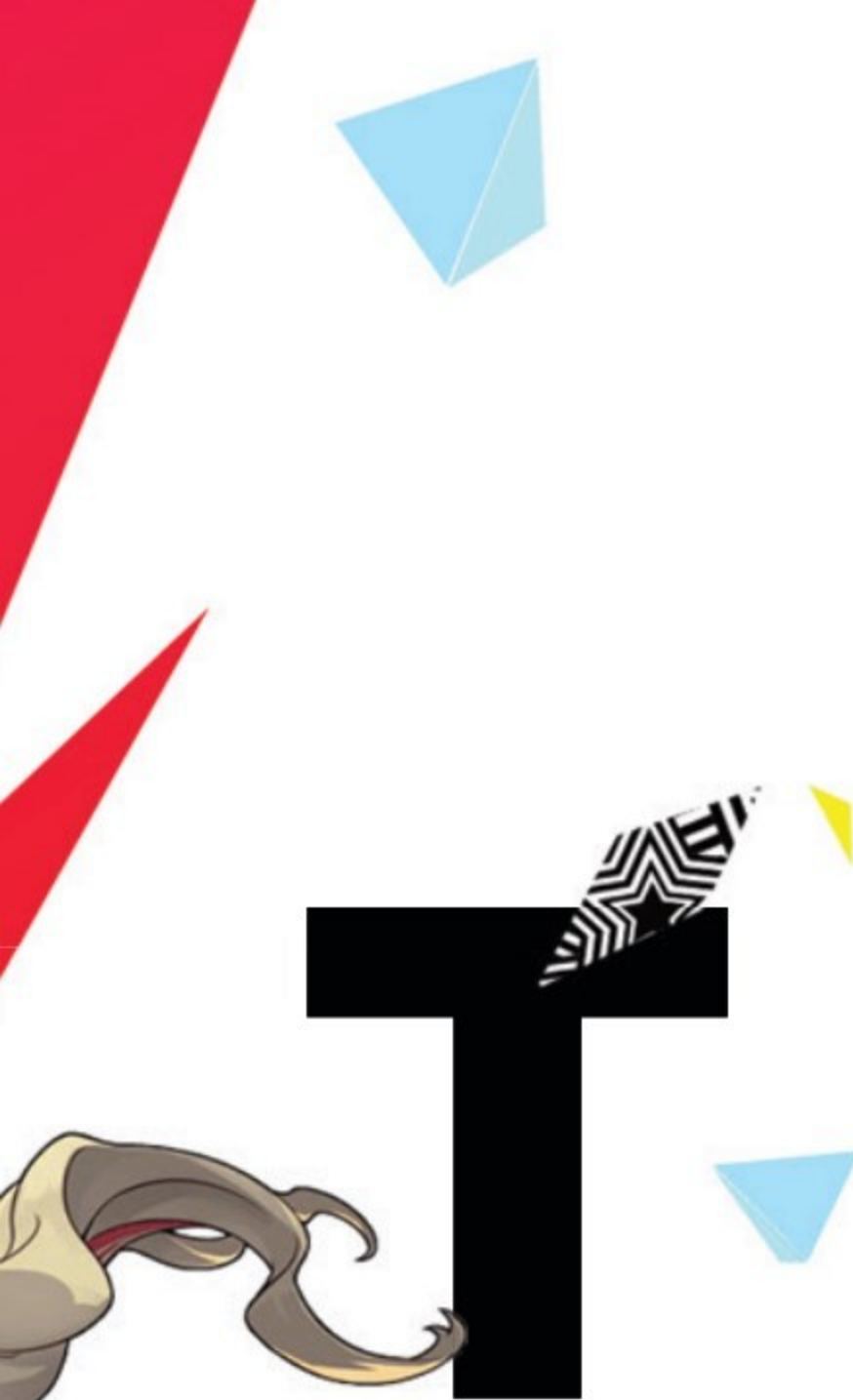
(Right) This month news broke that famed game writer and director Amy Hennig will be the recipient of the GDC's Lifetime Achievement award. She also met Ben Reeves, which was way less exciting.



Tailoring Persona's Signature Style

How the Atlus JRPG integrates the world of fashion to cement its identity

by Kimberley Wallace



The Persona series is all about style. The distinct aesthetic, coupled with its great sense of fashion, has made the franchise stand out from its competitors. You immediately recognize a Persona game when you see it; they're always striking, avoiding the generic designs that run rampant among JRPGs. Every character's style says something about them, and the series isn't shy about embracing its Japanese culture.

As Persona continues to surge in popularity, the creators have had to think outside the box for how they present their characters. It's one thing to make Persona 5's Ann stand out visually from her other schoolmates with an unconventional, American-influenced design; it's another to stay true to her essence and redesign her as a dancer with a more modern, urban flair for a rhythm game. With the recent Persona 3 and 5 dancing titles, alongside Joker's debut in Super Smash Bros. Ultimate, the artists have had plenty of practice, and we had the opportunity to discuss how they approach character designs through the lens of fashion.

Putting The Character First

While Persona is deeply rooted in its Japanese culture, the artists don't necessarily try to follow the trend of the moment, such as Gothic Lolita, since they can easily come and go. "It takes some time from the beginning of development to the game's release, so we actually try not to include the 'current trend,'" says character designer Shigenori Soejima. "We have no way of knowing if the trend will still be relevant at the time of the game's launch, so in most cases, we try to include timeless designs."

Instead, the team considers what makes sense for the character they're working on. "The designs stem from the title image, and from there, each character's design direction is decided. Many things are considered, such as 'What is this character's background? What kind of clothes would they wear?'" Soejima explains. "Costumes are just as important as the character's face, as they convey what the character is like. Therefore, when we try to communicate certain things through the [clothing], we pick and choose features that already convey a common perception instead of adding a special feature." Subtle touches are in the design of each character to help convey their personality. In Persona 3, Akihiko is a boxer dedicated to growing stronger, while Junpei is more of an everyman with a laid-back attitude. To reflect this, Akihiko's face is adorned with bandages, and Junpei sports a casual baseball hat.

Even though the art team tries not to chase fashion trends, it's not opposed to bringing in some cool Japanese styles. When they do, the influences tend to come from overseas. "I think that there aren't any [major] fashion trends that don't end up making their way to Japan," says artist Hanako Oribe. "Aside from Japan's own unique fashion, most of the trends come from abroad. So in that sense, we do pull from foreign trends. We also use foreign music videos as reference." That's actually how they came up with the dance costume of Persona 5's Ann, with artist Akane Kabayashi calling it, "a style of street fashion that you'd see in a music video."

While the team doesn't want popular culture to become a crutch for their inspiration, they are willing to incorporate

up-and-coming fashion into their own vision. "Personally, I occasionally look at magazines that feature the fashion styles seen at something like Paris Fashion Week," Kabayashi adds. "It's a good reference for what styles will be incorporated into everyday fashion, and what textures and materials are out there."

Dancing With Style

On top of showcasing the soundtracks, the dancing spin-offs also highlight the sleek aesthetic of each game. Unsurprisingly, it's here that the artists feel the most adventurous. "Fashion in any other series is designed to [be secondary to] the characters' personality, but in the Dancing series, the clothes are designed so that the individual characters wearing those particular costumes will be marketable," Akane Kabayashi says. "This is because a great importance is placed on story elements in the mainline [Persona] series, while artistic elements such as music and fashion are emphasized in [the Dancing] series."

Persona 4: Dancing All Night was the team's first rhythm outing, and they quickly learned that diverging too far from what's in touch with the characters wouldn't do them justice. The difficult balancing act came with some fashion faux pas on the team's first attempt. "When designing the costumes for P4D, we were being conscious of incorporating a 'dance' feel, more than a 'Persona 4' feel," Soejima says. "After Persona 3: Dancing in Moonlight (P3D) and Persona 5: Dancing in Starlight (P5D) had been greenlit, we realized we had to give a design direction per title. In terms of design, what we did back in P4D came back to haunt us, rather than help us (laughs)."





And that it did. The most difficult part developing Persona 3 and 5 Dancing simultaneously was not replicating what they did in the previous game. “I learned to have a keen eye for repetitive costume ideas,” Oribe says. “During the ideation phase for the P3D & P5D costumes, there were several times when we came up with something we’d already done in P4D.”

To make both games feel different and true to the characters, the artists went with “street and punk styles” that

were in line for Persona 5’s Tokyo setting, while for P3D, “classier and more polished” attire was used as a way to showcase that cast’s more serious demeanor. The team also tried its best to consider if a character would really sport an outfit or not, and alter it to fit their persona. “Adjustments were made to show off individuality,” says artist Azusa Shimada. “Mitsuru as a character wouldn’t show her bare shoulders, so her design in the P3D music video was adjusted to reflect that.”

Fashion Forward

Persona is a series growing in popularity, with people wanting to emulate the characters and its style. It’s something the designers think about when creating the outfits. “We do intentionally create the designs to be cosplayable,” Kabayashi confirms. “We try to add in pieces that would be acceptable as everyday fashion and design with a thought process like, ‘This looks cool and seems like it would be sold in stores.’”

Despite attempting to attract players to its chic appeal, the team is coy when musing if their designs influence the current fashion climate. “Wouldn’t that be nice?” Soejima says, laughing. But maybe it’s not so crazy to think the series’ distinct style might have some cultural impact. “This is a bit different from fashion trends, but I saw a foreigner wearing Ryuji’s non-uniform outfit the other day,” Oribe says. “It was very shocking to see someone wearing the clothes we designed!” You could do much worse than copying Persona’s eclectic style. After all, there’s a reason why fans keep talking about what the characters wear. ✦





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THE BEST TABLETOP GAMES OF 2018

Another banner year for the board-game hobby offers dozens of remarkable projects, melding art, design, and strategic depth to bring friends and families together around the table. From ancient Japan to the Wild West and out into the depths of space, this year's best releases offer options for veterans and newcomers alike. *by Matt Miller*

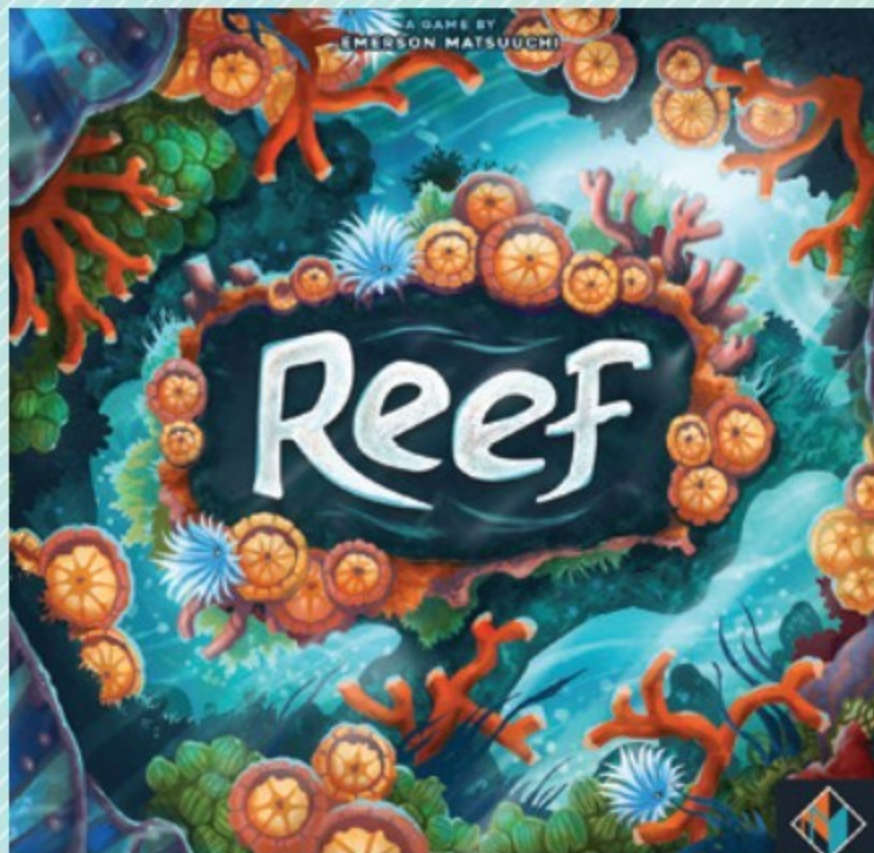


KEYFORGE: CALL OF THE ARCHONS

Publisher: Fantasy Flight Games

Who's it for? CCG fans who want to get right into the action

Many shy away from card duelers because of the implied investment in both time and money. Richard Garfield, the creator of Magic: The Gathering, brings us this new twist and remedy to the dilemma. Each deck comes as a complete and fixed named set, one with billions of potential possibilities. The quick-playing, combo-focused play is rewarding to learn and deeply challenging to master.



REEF

Publisher: Next Move Games

Who's it for? Abstract strategists ready for an ocean escapade

The environmental overtones of this game are abundant, but it's the elegant play that wins accolades. Players build their own coral reef from colorful, stackable pieces, and score points for creating particular configurations. Learning the rules takes minutes, and is welcoming to all ages. Don't be fooled by the colorful aesthetic; this is an engaging challenge for players of any skill level.



BETRAYAL LEGACY

Publisher: Avalon Hill

Who's it for? Horror fans in for the long haul

Betrayal at House on the Hill has entertained gamers for years, as players work together to plunder a haunted mansion until one of you turns traitor. The new legacy game replicates that conceit, but extends the story across generations of families that return to the same perilous locale. As the centuries pass, new horrors reflect historical fears, and your personal and unique stories and artifacts come back to haunt you.

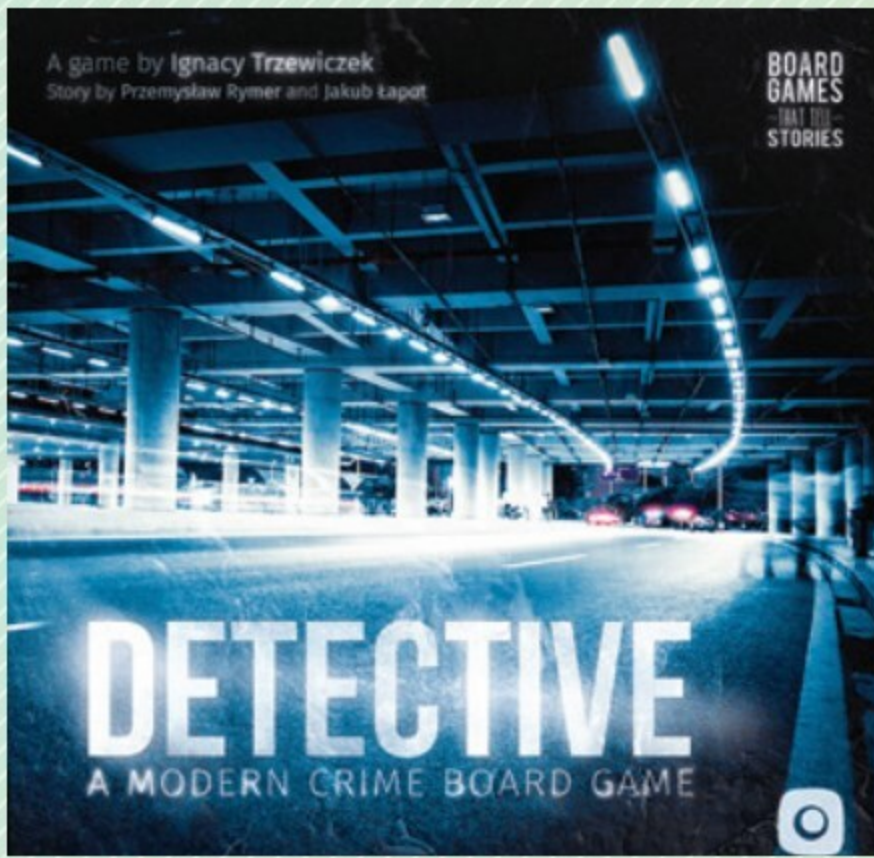


RISING SUN

Publisher: CMON

Who's it for? Experienced shoguns ready to visit mythical Japan

The breathtaking art and miniatures may be the thing that catches your eye, but it's the manifold strategic choices that make Rising Sun an instant classic. Lead your clan to victory across a mythological feudal Japan, where honor must be satisfied as you wage war, forge alliances, and summon legendary monsters. Innovative turns and action options are sure to impress experienced player groups.



DETECTIVE: A MODERN CRIME BOARD GAME

Publisher: Portal Games

Who's it for? Investigators looking for immersive deduction

Combining innovative board-game mechanics with a real-world online database, Detective seamlessly integrates digital elements into play. As the web of clues broadens in each case, players must connect the dots, even if they don't have the full picture. Immersive in a way few other board games have managed, the thought-provoking gameplay creates the illusion of real police work.



FIREBALL ISLAND: THE CURSE OF VUL-KAR

Publisher: Restoration Games

Who's it for? Nostalgic gamers who can't wait to knock their friends off the volcano

Children of the '80s may recall the original Fireball Island, which found players rolling a marble down the 3D board to knock their friends off. The remake maintains the fun premise, but layers on modern design and components, reinvigorating the beloved game for a new generation with brisk playtime and playful presentation.

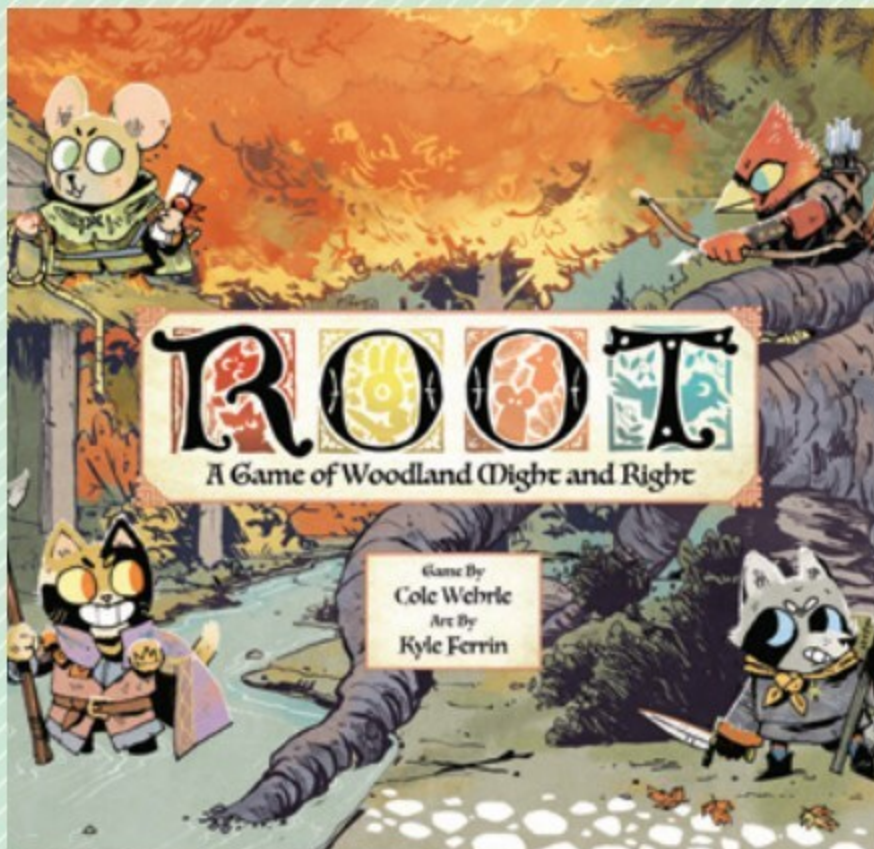


GEN7

Publisher: Plaid Hat Games

Who's it for? Sci-fi explorers hoping to survive deep space

You are the seventh generation on your deep space colony ship, and things are going very wrong out in the void. In this story-focused game, players work to survive one new disaster after the next, using each character's unique capabilities to confront the unknown. Characterized by seemingly impossible decisions, Gen7 draws players into its tense narrative with innovative gameplay and smart writing.



ROOT

Publisher: Leder Games

Who's it for? Whimsical woodland creatures ready for a brutal fight

Marvelous asymmetric design takes center stage in Root, in which equal but drastically different factions of anthropomorphized animals battle to seize control of the forest. The cute characters bely a ferocious war game in which each faction must capitalize on their unique strengths. Cute yet cutthroat, Root will impress longtime gamers through depth and flexibility.



STUFFED FABLES

Publisher: Plaid Hat Games

Who's it for? Families ready for cooperative adventure

Families can't go wrong with this delightful fantasy about stuffed animals who must save their beloved little girl from an evil mastermind. The pages of the adventure book serve as the actual board, with each page a new story to explore. Everyone cooperates to win, sharing stuffing after the baddies knock it out, even as the narrative beats quietly echo the milestones and trials of actual childhood.



WESTERN LEGENDS

Publisher: Kolossal Games

Who's it for? Cowboys ready for a sandbox of outlaws, marshals, and gunfights

It's a good year for open-world cowboy exploits. In the board-gaming world, Western Legends puts you in the shoes of a fabled gunslinger like Annie Oakley or Billy the Kid, and sets you loose to make your fortune. Rob the bank, or win a hand of poker. Rustle cattle, or hunt down outlaws. The breadth of activities is impressive, and victory is possible on either side of the law. 🌵



photo: Andrew Faulk

Moving To His Own Beat

Creator of *Rez* and *Lumines*, **Tetsuya Mizuguchi** has watched with great interest as video game technology evolved. A longtime enthusiast of finding ways to immerse an audience, Mizuguchi developed a passion for virtual reality early in his career. Following the successful release of his latest game, *Tetris Effect*, we spoke with him about his history.

What drew you to video games?

When I was young, I wanted to be a music video director, but many excellent music videos already exist. To me, I was not so excited for a new type of music video. I wanted to create a new experience; I'd love to walk in pure snow. When I decided to go to the game industry, that was 1990, so the 2D era. Resolution was low, as were graphics and sound, but I could

see the future – the resolution getting higher, 2D going to 3D, maybe VR and AR. I didn't know when, but I could see that kind of forecast. I felt the game field must be fun to create a new thing with sound, visuals, maybe vibration, or other devices like 3D. There's no limits.

How did you decide to work at Sega?

When I was young, I saw this crazy arcade machine called R360. It was a huge, giant arcade game. It was a ball on a base and it would spin when you played the game it was connected to. Usually it was *Afterburner* or *G-Loc*, and you'd move in the ball as you played. When I saw the Sega logo on it I thought, "I want to go there." I felt very strongly about that; I didn't want to go to Nintendo or Namco, just Sega.

After working on Sega Rally Championship, you jumped into making games centered around music and you've rarely looked back. Is this style why you originally wanted to get into games?

Yes. At the time, I had a really fuzzy vision of Rez – something flying and shooting with sound effects and music. I'm talking about those kinds of ideas with my staff, but my staff's reaction was like, "What are you talking about? You're talking about a game or you're talking about what?" At the time, it was really tough to exchange the ideas and the vision, but I wanted to make something new anyway. I involved young artists – not only game experts. I looked for some new talent from the music or visual artists and mixed them with the game programmers. We'd all talk and then we'd go out to clubs or go to a drumming workshop.

How does music influence your work?

To me, music is the energy source to drive the emotional things. Even if it's only beats, you feel the groove. Music is a very unique form that physically, emotionally, and mentally moves you. I want to use that kind of music and the power of the sounds. I want to combine [that] with a game experience and I want to create a new type of experience. To me, the sound of music is like water; I need that. I can't live without music.

You speak a lot about immersing your audience in the experience. In the early '90s, Sega had a VR prototype headset. Is that where your interest in VR started?

I joined Sega in 1990, and my first project was making a head-mount Game Gear. I made it by myself by taking apart a Game Gear and using the parts. Nobody asked me [laughs], I just wanted to make it. It was ugly looking, but I wanted to make that. I carried that to the executive board meeting, saying we should make a head-mount Game Gear, but nothing happened at the time. That was my big motivation; I wanted to create VR.

Your first independent studio, Q Entertainment, had a hit right off the bat with Lumines. How important was that?

That was so important – the first project. The original announcement from Sony for the PSP was that it was an interactive Walkman. So I got inspiration. We had three basic ideas. I decided to make the puzzle with music game. I tried to make Tetris first, but

we had licensing problem with The Tetris Company, which was licensed to EA. It was impossible, so I decided to make a new IP about music and puzzles.

Were there any lessons you took from the development of Ninety-Nine Nights that carried on to later work?

I wanted to have big-production experience where there were over 100 people. That was really fun. We had the collaboration with the Korean developer Phantagram and they had 70 or 80 people and Q Entertainment was 15. We created a very basic story idea inspired by the Kurosawa film *Rashomon*. We worked together for two or three years and I'd often go to Korea.

At the end of final production, we got short on time. I wanted to create more, but Microsoft said we needed to finalize the project. That was a really good experience, but personally I have a big regret I couldn't make it 100 percent. Maybe, in the future, I don't want to create with that kind of a big team. Also, I decided that we're best by ourselves, so we can create the game until we're satisfied... mostly.

When you left Q Entertainment, you took a break from the game industry. What inspired you to return to found Enhance?

Q was established by three people, including me. I had some frustrations about the funding process, or that Q Entertainment tried to become a good company, not a creative production. Personally, I didn't like that and I was so tired. I couldn't do that, so I decided to leave Q Entertainment and I stopped making games for about three years. I started to teach at a university. I changed my life a little bit and I took a breath. Then, I met with [Hideto Yamada] at BitSummit – an old friend. We had a short conversation about synesthesia experience. He did tests with Unity technology and he tried to do some engine creation, and I got inspired to do it too.

Now, Enhance is like a publishing and producing company. We are working with the studios and we have very good alliances with no stress. Depending on the project, we can change the shape. When I established the new company, I thought about why the movie industry was still rolling and getting healthier all the time – producer, director, actor, cameraman – any talent is independent, and the movie pictures like Sony Pictures or Universal, there are producers with no artists inside these huge movie

companies. We can do the same thing.

What was it like beginning work on Rez Infinite knowing that after all these years, you'd finally get to create a true virtual reality title?

I'll never forget the first time I played Rez Infinite Area X in VR. I cried in my headset. I was so happy – it was the pure vision of what I had. It was a free world. I had that kind of ambition for a long, long time. When I told that ambition to the team, they thought it would make people sick, but I felt that if that free vision would make you sick, then VR isn't the future for me. So we tried and when I played, I didn't feel sick; I felt really good. I was so moved. I was so happy. But this is just the beginning.

Tetris Effect seems like a culmination of sorts for you. You've dreamed of VR your whole career, and you unsuccessfully pursued the Tetris license for what eventually became Lumines 15 years ago.

So, 15 years ago, I thought about Tetris, but nothing happened at the time, but I kept thinking and kept in touch with Henk [Rogers], the chairman of The Tetris Company. He's a really good friend of mine. We had a long creative discussion. [Takashi] Ishihara, he's the director and art director, he really understands my concepts all the time about things like Rez and Lumines. For me and my team, this is a long history.

How do you view the current state of virtual reality?

It's still a baby. Early '90s, when I was with Sega, it wasn't a baby yet – like the Stone Age. Now, it's getting to birth. The next 20 or 30 years will change dramatically. It's very exciting. There are no limits with new technology – console technology, cloud technology, tangible, intangible. It's kind of a mirror of dreams, desires, and wants. This is an amazing state. No limits to creators. I love that.

Do you want to stay at the forefront of virtual reality, or do you want to bounce between traditional experiences and VR?

We can go both directions. The big motivation for making Tetris Effect with VR – of course you can play without VR – we need that kind of a game that everybody knows and everybody has the experience to play. Everybody thinks, "What? Tetris meets VR?" It's a big question mark. But now people can play Tetris and it can be a new experience. The reason we got the license from The Tetris Company – and it was not easy – is we wanted to take an old game with a long history and adapt it to make a new experience. I wanted to prove that. 💎

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1990

Tetsuya Mizuguchi joins Sega, working on interactive rides and R&D prototyping, including an early VR concept

1994

Mizuguchi's first game, racer Sega Rally Championship, is released in arcades to wide acclaim

2000

Mizuguchi's dev team R&D 9 rebrands to United Game Artists (UGA) and works on Space Channel 5 and Rez

2003

Mizuguchi leaves Sega to start a new studio, Q Entertainment. Work begins on what will become Lumines and Meteos

2004

Musical puzzle game Lumines releases in Japan (2005 in the West) and is an early smash-hit for Sony's new PSP handheld

2006

Mizuguchi produces the music track "Heavenly Star," which gains over two million views on YouTube and is a minor radio hit in Japan

2011

Mizuguchi's last real project at Q, Kinect-enabled Rez spiritual successor Child of Eden, launches for Xbox 360

2012

Looking for new inspiration, Mizuguchi leaves gaming to teach Media Design at Keio University

2014

Mizuguchi returns refreshed to gaming, starting Enhance Inc., to work on Rez Infinite

2018

Mizuguchi's latest game, PS4/PSVR psychedelic puzzler Tetris Effect debuts, earning an 89 on Metacritic

gear

Shop

50

Merchandise from Game Informer's
Top 50 games of the year

by Ben Reeves



God of War Life-Size Replica Axe

\$59.99 | necaonline.com

This detailed foam replica of Kratos' Leviathan axe measures 36 inches and is painted to match the in-game model. It won't return to your hand at will, but you can safely throw it at annoying relatives.

Lucky Seven Fortnite Caps

\$82.00 | luckysevencaps.com

Looking for new skins for your real-life avatar? We love this headgear from Lucky Seven, which features a host of great Fortnite-themed designs. You can buy it with cash, which is kind of like physical V-Bucks.



Nendoroid Pokémon Trainer Champion Figure Set

\$99.99 | pokemoncenter.com

Diagram some of your favorite memories from Pokémon: Let's Go, Pikachu! and Let's Go, Eevee! with these adorable four-inch PVC figures. The full set includes poseable figures of Venusaur, Charizard, Blastoise, and the Pokémon trainer.



Red Dead Redemption II Leather iPad Case

\$84.99 | rockstarwarehouse.com

If you like to digitally record your outlaw adventures, you can dress your iPad to match Arthur Morgan's in-game notebook. This officially licensed iPad case is made from real leather and features a deboss of the Red Dead Redemption II logo.



Assassin's Creed Odyssey Kassandra Figurine

\$54.99 | store.ubi.com

Ubisoft created two adventurous Greek pre-Assassins, but the only one who didn't sound like Strong Bad was Kassandra, posed here heroically on an ancient Greek column and armed with the Broken Spear of Leonidas.

MEDIA SHELF



Celeste Original Soundtrack

It's been almost a year since Celeste's launch, but Lena Raine's pulsing ambient soundtrack is still stuck in our heads. This colorful vinyl soundtrack features 19 amazing musical treats worth keeping on repeat.

\$35.00
shiptoshoremedia.com

Dragon Ball Super Bundle

Your Blu-ray library will go Super Saiyan Blue with this collection of the first five seasons of Funimation's Dragon Ball Super, which features more than 27 hours of high-octane fistfights and zany humor.

\$224
funimation.com

Spider-Man Vs. Venom Hardcover Omnibus

Catch up on the history of one of Spider-Man's deadliest foes in this massive tome that includes more than 1,000 pages of Spider-Man and Venom's deadliest battles.

\$125
marvel.com

Quotable

"...We've made the difficult decision to shift some developers from Heroes of the Storm to other teams..."



J. Allen Brack, Blizzard CEO, signals that the company may be moving on from the game. The company has also announced that the Heroes Global Championship and Heroes of the Dorm tournaments are not being held this year.

The Good



The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt's **GERALT OF RIVIA** is featured in Monster Hunter: World. He comes with unique quests and gameplay that bring the Capcom and CD Projekt Red franchises together.

The Bad

Epic is still riding high with **FORTNITE**, so it's not super surprising that Tim Sweeney, founder and CEO, has told Variety that further development on shooter Unreal Tournament has been halted. The Unreal Engine 4 title was announced in 2014 but hasn't been updated since 2017.



It's bad enough that Fallout 76 has been a disappointing mess, and **BETHESDA** hasn't been helping itself either. Bethesda opened itself up to a potential class-action lawsuit for giving special-edition owners nylon bags instead of the canvas ones that were advertised with that version of the game. Though the company is making good on the original offer, some of the support tickets generated by the incident exposed users' personal information to other players. 💎

The Ugly



February 2019

GAME RELEASES

Friday 01

- › Ace Combat 7: Skies Unknown (PC)

Tuesday 05

- › Etrian Odyssey: Nexus (3DS)
- › The Occupation (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Wednesday 06

- › Overkill's The Walking Dead (PS4, Xbox One)

Thursday 07

- › Total War: Three Kingdoms (PC)

Friday 08

- › God Eater 3 (PS4, PC)
- › Monster Energy Supercross 2 (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)

Tuesday 12

- › Trials Rising (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)

Thursday 14

- › Civilization VI: Gathering Storm (PC)

Friday 15

- › Crackdown 3 (Xbox One, PC)
- › Dead or Alive 6 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- › Far Cry New Dawn (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- › Jump Force (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- › Metro Exodus (PS4, Xbox One, PC) ❶

Friday 22

- › Anthem (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Tuesday 26

- › Anno 1800 (PC)
- › Dirt Rally 2.0 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- › Left Alive (PS4, PC)



MOVIE & TV PREMIERES

Sunday 03

- › Super Bowl LIII (CBS)

Friday 08

- › The Lego Movie 2: The Second Part (theaters)
- › PEN15 (Hulu)

Sunday 10

- › 61st Grammy Awards (CBS)
- › The Walking Dead (AMC)

Friday 15

- › Alita: Battle Angel (theaters)
- › The Umbrella Academy (Netflix)

Friday 22

- › How to Train Your Dragon: The Hidden World (theaters) ❷

Sunday 24

- › 91st Annual Academy Awards (ABC)



GAMER CULTURE

Friday 01

Wolverine: Infinity Watch ❸

Where was Wolverine? Why was he appearing all over the planet? Did he have Infinity Stones? Loki has the answers, and he's going to take Logan across the universe to get them. The first issue of the five-part Wolverine: Infinity Watch series launches this month.

Monday 11

D.I.C.E. 2019

Some of the biggest names in video games will once again be at D.I.C.E. to discuss the evolution of the medium and the path they've taken to elevate it.

Their stories come out in talks and workshops, pinpointing their successes and failures. The show wraps up with the 22nd annual D.I.C.E. Awards. The talks and awards will both be livestreamed.

Thursday 14

Overwatch League Season 2

With eight new teams added to the mix, Overwatch League returns with more weight behind it, but will it be able to draw viewers in? We'll find out today when the first matches are played. One big change is giving teams more time between matches to strategize for their opponents. ❹

» **PLATFORM**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

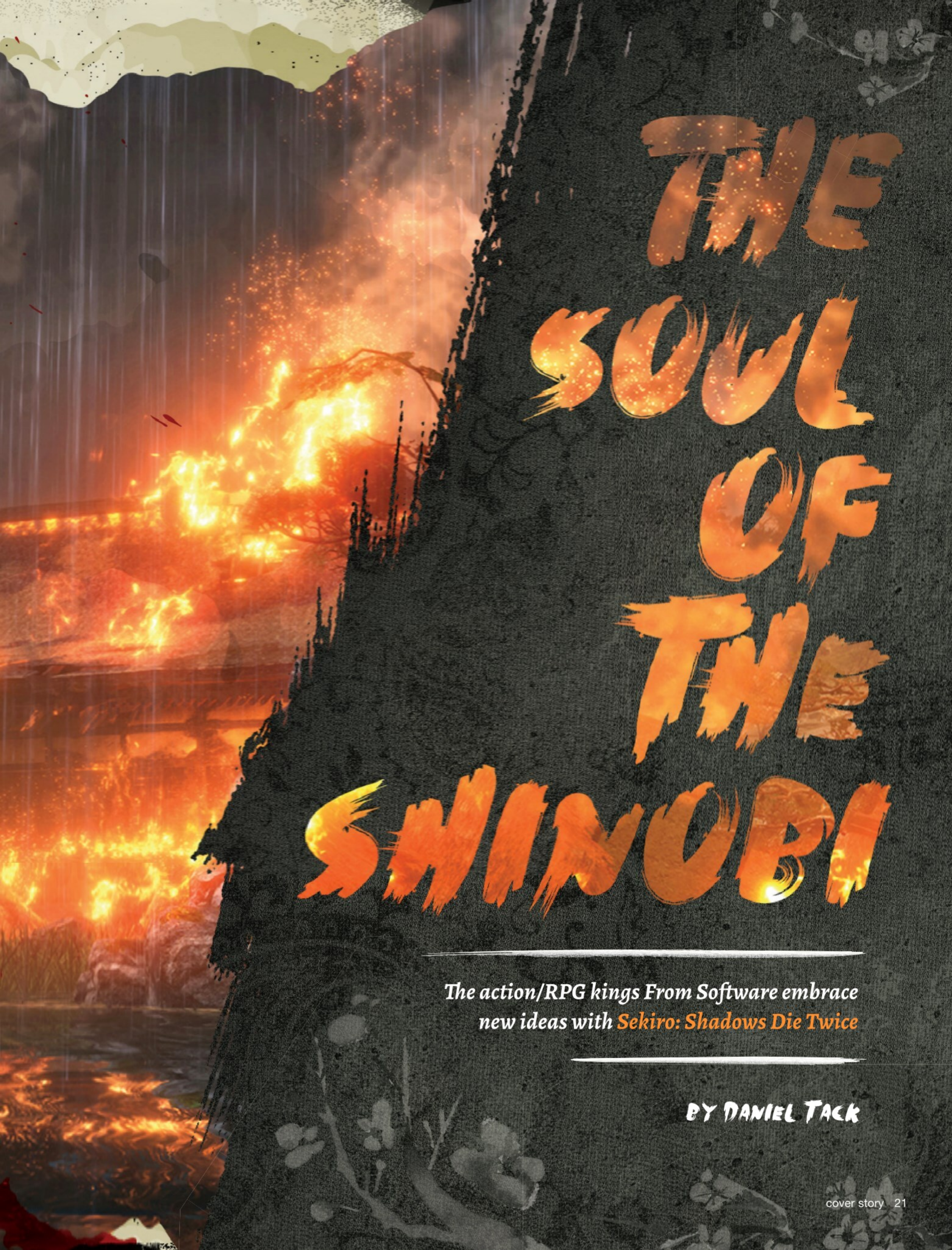
» **STYLE**
1-Player Action

» **PUBLISHER**
Activision

» **DEVELOPER**
From Software

» **RELEASE**
March 22





THE SOUL OF THE SHINOBI

The action/RPG kings From Software embrace
new ideas with **Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice**

BY DANIEL TACK



FROM SOFTWARE'S RECENT RUN OF ACTION/RPGS HAVE RAISED THE JAPANESE DEVELOPER INTO RARIFIED AIR.

These atmospheric, challenging games have an ambivalence toward the player's existence inside their worlds many modern titles would be hesitant to embrace. But that hasn't stopped them from becoming the darlings of the genre.

Starting with Demon's Souls and continuing with three Dark Souls titles and Bloodborne, the company's releases have consistently placed in the upper 80s to lower 90s on Metacritic – an impressive feat considering how disparate these demanding games feel in a universe of overtutorialization and heavy-handed storytelling. In the wake of these successes, From Software has essentially created its own subgenre of "Soulslike" games that have inspired many imitators.

With Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice, the Japanese developer continues to iterate and expand on the philosophies that have defined the studio. Dark Souls fans will be pleased that elements like precise combat, larger-than-life bosses, and a mysterious world to explore are all here. But Sekiro extends beyond the traditional boundaries of a From Software action game, adding significant elements that make it feel like a bold new entry to a long line of incredible titles, especially in terms of traversal, stealth, death mechanics, and progression of a singular character and play style.

We traveled to Tokyo, Japan, to play several hours of the game and speak with the team behind it, including studio president Hidetaka Miyazaki.



GRAPPLING WITH THE PAST

Sekiro isn't From Software's first foray into the dark art of ninjutsu. Back in 2004, From bought the rights to the popular Tenchu series from Activision and oversaw the release of several disappointing titles before the brand went dormant in 2008. Sekiro originally began as a Tenchu reboot, but during the early conceptualization phase, From instead decided to make a new IP that wouldn't carry the baggage of that brand. Though Sekiro charts its own path, you can see the Tenchu DNA in the design and flavor of many mechanics, especially flying around zones with the grappling hook and vanishing into the reeds to set up stealth kills. From reached out to several publishers during this time, eventually partnering up with Tenchu's original owner, Activision.

Starting over with a blank slate afforded From many opportunities to differentiate Sekiro from its predecessors. One of the more noticeable changes is how the game moves away from the character creation and build choice of previous From titles in favor of a static hero with a defined past. This tale of vengeance set in Sengoku-era Japan follows the exploits of Sekiro, a shinobi tasked with the protection of a young lord. Sekiro falls in battle, has his arm ripped off, and is left for dead. When the young lord is kidnapped, our hero must piece himself back together and destroy the ones responsible. Trained by the ancient master known as The Owl, Sekiro is The Wolf – defanged, as the case may be, his missing arm replaced by a



powerful prosthetic that can be outfitted with many tools by the mysterious Sculptor.

My demo starts right in the action – I'm playing a zone a little bit past the first few areas known as the Samurai Residence. After obtaining a mystical bell in one of the early areas of the game, this zone is accessible via memories in the hub area. The memory ostensibly takes us back three years in the past (which I gleaned from talking to a dying soldier) during the sacking and burning of a prestigious samurai house.

Atmosphere is one of From Software's specialties, but this is quite a diversion

from the dark fantasy and cosmic horror we've seen before. Cherry blossoms, wide-open spaces, rivers, reeds, and traditional Japanese architecture abound during this experience, which takes place at dusk. The darkening sky is punctuated by many burning, collapsing buildings as the soldiers raze the estate to the ground. This dive into memory is a one-off ordeal, and while you can fast travel in and out of it via the Sculptor's idols (Sekiro's equivalent to Dark Souls' bonfires), it's outside of the standard gameplay arena and not interconnected with the rest of the space.

The core concepts of Sekiro should be instantly recognizable to fans of the Souls series. Spirit emblems power your prosthetics, which function sort of like magic. A healing gourd functions as your Estus flask. Numerous elements have their roots in From's other titles as well. However, there are also some new aspects in play here. One of these is the grappling hook.

The grappling hook is a free add-on to your prosthetic limb, meaning it can always be used. The Tengu-inspired ability to move around environments with the hook changes things wildly from the formula of From Software's recent games. Instead of waiting for some huge monster to ambush me from behind a corner, I zip around from high ground to cover, setting up ambushes of my own. While most of my opponents in this area are poorly geared soldiers decked out with garb and weapons of the time period, hints of Miyazaki's bizarre signature creations are apparent as well, including mutant roosters and poison-spewing liz-

LANDS OF LORE

Sekiro takes place during the Sengoku period of Japanese history, an especially bloody time of warring houses and endless feuds as dynasties were locked in constant power struggles. This backdrop of blood and war is perfect for the creation of our protagonist, a gruff ninja with murder on his mind for those who struck him down and kidnapped the lord he was entrusted to protect.

The game has an overarching storyline involving Sekiro and his quest that's crystal clear and doesn't require any of the lore introspection From Software's previous games may have demanded, where players would need to dive into item descriptions and hidden chunks of lore to piece the tale together. However, those esoteric bits of lore still exist in Sekiro, and offer the same sort of additional information for inquisitive players looking for more outside of the main arc.

After playing a few hours of Sekiro and seeing some of the strange creatures with red eyes, and looking at other aberrant creatures and creations available from bits of trailers here and there, I'm confident that although our tale starts out as a standard shinobi/samurai tale, where we end up will be anything but. While feudal-era Japan serves as an amazing, beautiful backdrop for wherever the story goes, I have a feeling we're going to see some wild Miyazaki creations as we move through.

ards. Being able to take leaps of faith in various directions looking for a grapple target or fully exploring an area is empowering and makes the world feel decidedly more open. Enemies in Sekiro can often be numerous, so using the grappling hook to stealthily move around the environment while deciding how to engage with the enemy is a smart tactic.

But this isn't a stealth game. While the hook and hiding can help you better manage how many enemies you're facing, Sekiro still demands precise action combat. Stamina management is gone, so you can run and swing to your heart's content. Combat instead hinges on careful application of blows, dodging, combat arts, prosthetic powers, and perhaps the most important, deflection.

The timing of swords clashing is designed to make the most of Sekiro's singular weapon focus, and your katana can be extremely deadly once you master the art of turning a foe's blade away to create an attack opportunity. After stealth-slaying a few unwary guards by sidling along walls and hiding in foliage, I lock into a real battle with several angry guards. Here's where the posture system comes in, as all enemy-slaying ends with the shinobi deathblow. By weakening and wearing down an enemy's guard, you open them up for a final, flashy attack. These finishing moves are at the crux of every battle, and experienced players can manipulate the timing to gain some invulnerable frames during the death animations. The two jokers with torches

and dull swords don't present too much of a threat, and I can break their posture easily by just spamming the attack button. However, they are the exception to the rule, as any battle can be dangerous. A few fights later I encounter one of From's longstanding enemy types, the dog. They're fast, often come in pairs, and can chain bite you down into the ground, especially when other enemies are in the mix.

Dispatching a few more packs of enemies and using the grappling hook to bypass some areas, I come across my first mini-boss. Mini-bosses are numerous in Sekiro, and many do not necessarily need to be beaten to advance, since there may be alternate routes. However, it's in your best interests to take them on, as they often drop valuable items that can provide a big advantage, like rosary beads that can be turned in for permanent health and posture boosts. This mini-boss has a few additional enemies milling about in the same area (which can actually work in the player's favor, if used strategically – we'll get to that in a minute). This is where I face my first real challenge.

Ninja hunter Enshin Hachiyouji is his name, and impaling Sekiro is his game. While I've been able to deftly dodge and slash my way to this point, having a grasp on deflection timing would have been valuable here. The ninja hunter makes short work of me, brutally slaughtering me with his spear. But as I soon learn, death is not the end in Sekiro. In fact, it's just part of the game.





A HUB OF ACTIVITY

Sekiro has a hub area known as the Ashina Outskirts, much like the Firelink Shrine in *Dark Souls* or Hunter's Dream in *Bloodborne*. Players can readily teleport from a Sculptor's idol to the hub, where they can engage with several characters (and likely more as the game goes on). While Sekiro can handle many of his essential functions at any checkpoint, some of the more important upgrades and developments can only be tackled here. Here are a few of the more important characters you can interact with.

The Sculptor

Creator of idols and prosthetics. Sekiro can return to the Sculptor to create prosthetics from materials, upgrade prosthetics, and advance other aspects of the story.

Emma

A mysterious woman with medicinal skills. Sekiro can give Emma spirit-water drops to increase the amount of charges in his healing gourd.

The Immortal Soldier

A swordsman who can't die, the immortal soldier functions as an essential training dummy – though he's a bit more interesting than a stationary target to smash. Whenever you learn new abilities, you can come master your skills practicing them here.

The Butterfly Hag is an epic encounter of speed and illusions



The Ashina Outskirts serves as your hub and base of operations



DEATH AND PROGRESS

Players of From Software titles are no strangers to death, and in Sekiro the unfortunate circumstance serves a critical role in the gameplay loop. You have two lives you can recharge through battle, and From hints at the possibility of acquiring more. One aspect of gaining an additional usable life is that you must execute a shinobi deathblow after you've popped back up from death to enable the next one in line, meaning it may behoove you to leave an easier enemy around when facing a particularly challenging opponent in order to gain an additional life. You can also trigger this with a deathblow on a boss, as most have multiple lives to get through, but it is far easier to slay a small minion. As an agile unarmored ninja instead of the shield-toting knight you can play as in Souls games, you can be slain fast. But you can make those deaths count, too.

As the mini-boss and his underling walk away, I can choose when to spring back to life. In some situations, this can be very useful to avoid a huge pack of enemies and let them leash back to their spawn positions after an ugly chase goes wrong. While the grappling hook and stealth allow you to get across zones quickly, you may attract too much attention during a long push toward the next zone. In this case, it's a simple matter of waiting for the opponent to turn their back, giving me a free setup and strike. In the end, the ninja hunter perseveres and sends me packing back to the sculptor's idol.

Sekiro also has a death penalty, but From isn't ready to share details on what exactly that entails yet. What we do know is it won't be a corpse-run mechanic as in previous games, where the player must go to where they died to recover resources. In fact, you keep everything through death in Sekiro, from coins to consumables to experience points.

"We want to try different approaches and different switching up the systems," says From Software president Hidetaka Miyazaki. "Speaking of death penalties, we do want to incorporate a new sense



of demerit or a disadvantage to death. We want the player to fear death in the same way they did before. But this will take on a different shape this time. There's a reason for coming back to life, and there's more general themes and concepts around death and rebirth, so this is something we wanted to explore on the gameplay side as well."

Death, challenge, and triumph have been longstanding cornerstones of From Software's stable. The sense that you're faced with something totally impossible, and then coming back and defeating it minutes, hours, or days later creates a victory rush that's unmatched – a sense of achievement that's about the act of defying the insurmountable. With no stats to enhance, Sekiro takes a different approach toward letting players get the edge they need to take on tough fights.

Progression has been a longstanding

topic of discussion for Sekiro, as the action/RPG staple of a stat-based advancement system is out. However, players gain experience points from slaying foes that can be used in various skill trees that function as permanent upgrades. Inside these trees are moves that can help players with different situations, like being able to follow up a shuriken toss with a slash, or stepping on an enemy's spear thrust. While active moves are an important part of these skill trees, it also has some passive ability branches, such as a skill that permanently enhances the effects of healing items. Various trees are unlocked over the course of the game, and you can choose where to put your points.

"The idea of a stat-based level-up system is that you are catering to different people's builds," Miyazaki says. "You have things that a mage can use, you have things that

THE SOUNDTRACK TO SLAYING

Recent From Software games were known for their sparing approach to storytelling and soundtracks. Unlike its predecessors, Sekiro features music for the majority of the game.

"This time it wasn't just boss battle music like our previous titles," says composer Yuka Kitamura. "We had to think about kind of general open field music, general battle music, enemy suspicion music. Also there's a larger element of story this time, so we had to think about individual theme songs for each character, and so we built the backbone of a lot of the boss battle music based on those character themes."





a strength-user can use, you know the greatswords, or these different sorceries, and pyromancies. This means that not all users have to use everything. They can specialize, or they can focus on their build. The idea of this game and the multifaceted ninja means you have to use everything in your arsenal, everything at your disposal to overcome these challenges. Having these as skills and items that you can gradually acquire, allows them to specialize in everything to a degree and to really become that really multitasking, multifaceted shinobi."

Your other main path of progress stems from your prosthetic attachments. Finding a new one can be a huge boon, but building them out is also a critical factor for success. By finding crafting materials around the world, you can augment your standard prosthetics with more devastating abilities. For example, your simple shuriken toss

can become a multi-shot blast. Despite all the customization from combat arts to prosthetic upgrades and enhancements, you won't be able to change your weapon or armor.

"There'll be no picking up of new armor or no kind of equipment customization in that sense," Miyazaki says. "You do have the katana and the prosthetic arm – these are your staples. We hope that there's a level of customization or kind of breadth that expands out from there through the use of skills through restructuring the prosthetic tools and through the combat arts as well that you can learn from the katana."

Even if you're having an extremely difficult time on a boss or encounter, you can continue to build out and explore your skill trees while coming up with fresh tactics or strategies. It's possible to unlock everything with some effort.



The Sengoku period is defined by endless wars and bloody battles





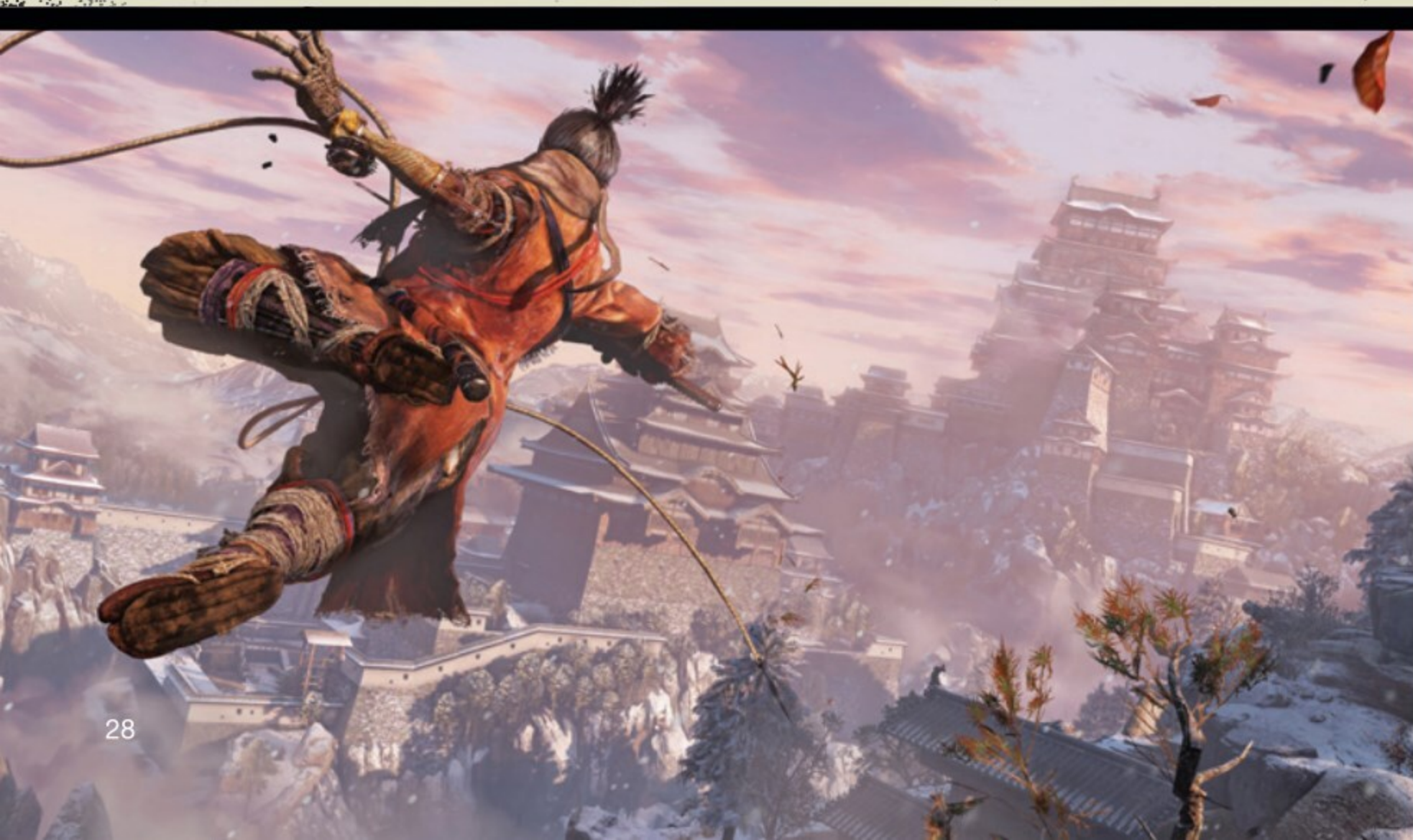
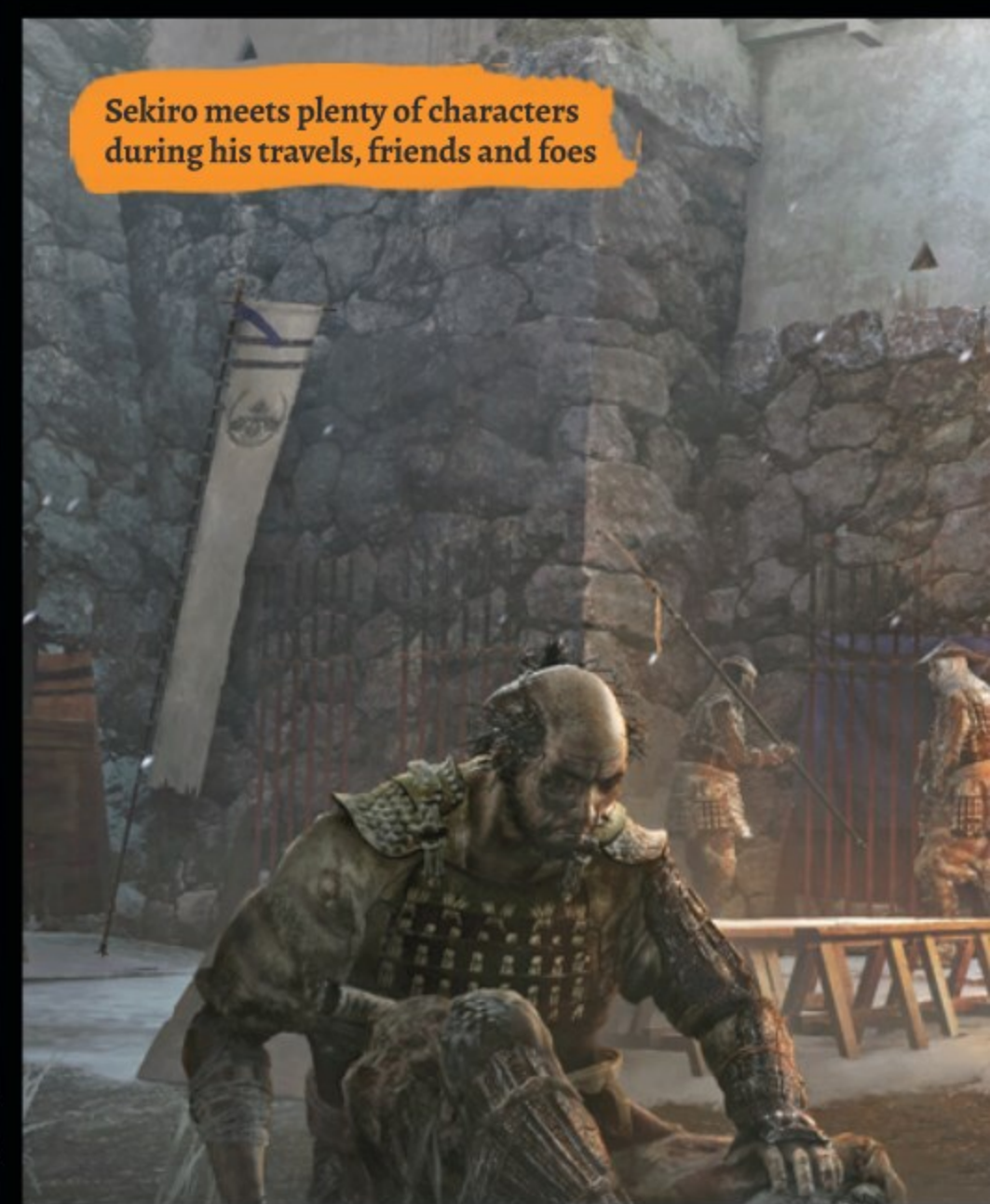
EXPLORING THE ESTATE

My next life takes me in a completely different direction across the estate. During one of my stealth sneak-ups, I listen in on two guards by using the d-pad when prompted. These little opportunities to overhear a critical piece of intel – like that an upcoming boss is scared of fire, for instance – are neat in-universe ways for From to convey important information to curious, careful players. This run takes me to a vast body of water, to which I immediately attempt to shy away from, but From staff tells me to take a dip.

Amazingly enough, I don't immediately die. Instead, I merrily paddle and swim around in the water. You can even dash to move around quickly and get to where you're going, which is likely to find an exposed tree branch or ledge to grapple to. A few takedowns and encounters later, I'm in a new area, a part of the estate engulfed in flames. Zipping from rooftop to rooftop, I find my next major roadblock guarding a



Sekiro meets plenty of characters during his travels, friends and foes



fog gate. While Sekiro features a slightly more open-ended structure than previous From titles, certain parts are blocked by fog doors that lead to bosses or that need to be cleared by beating certain foes.

"We feel like Sekiro's probably on the higher end of the spectrum in terms of the freedom the player has to explore the world if we're to compare it to our previous games," Miyazaki says. "Particularly from the mid-game onward, the world really opens up, and you have a great deal of choice and freedom about which order and way you choose to explore."

My next big foe is a huge sword-wielding mass of a mini-boss called Juzou the Drunkard. Not only does Juzou have a sword twice the length of a man and shocking speed for a being of that size, but he also loves to take pulls off a jug and bellow poison from his mouth. Part of the challenge of the encounter isn't just Juzou, but his many friends. Several fire archers

present a problem alongside two shielded guards. It's a war of attrition I don't win, and I'm sent packing back to the region's Sculptor's idol.

During my second attempt, I notice a man standing off from the encounter partly obscured by river reeds and a rock. He's also trying to protect the estate from its burning doom, and can assist the player in the fight against Juzou. I ask if this is similar to helpful NPCs that can be summoned in the Souls games to help battle against bosses, but this is apparently just a one-off occurrence. The man dies for good when he goes down, so he's not a reliable assistant. Once again, I fall prey to the army of enemies and their large leader.

At this point, I'm starting to sense my approach is off on these encounters. Running straight into the mini-boss arena is very different than in previous titles, as it opens me up to tons of vulnerabilities from the standard enemies. Since I acciden-

tally sequence-broke my way to this area (by taking an alternate route), I go back and explore the estate a bit more before attempting to move past Juzou.

The exploration pays off. I first discover a roost housing tons of extremely dangerous chickens, a handful of soldiers, and some poison lizards. I'm told you can use the poison lizard with some abilities to poison enemies. By using a blood-cloud ability to slay it, tainted blood will actually spray out and infect attackers around you. Canvassing more of the area, I snag two valuable prosthetic attachments. The first is the loaded axe, which allows the player to wind up a slow but extremely powerful attack that's great for breaking through posture and enemy shields. The shielded guards that have been causing massive problems for me are much easier when I put the axe to work, as it shatters their wooden shields upon contact. The other is the close-range flame vent, a welcome addition to my roster as there are plenty of foes that may be vulnerable to the element. The item tool tip tells me to be on the lookout for enemies with red eyes. Combined with my shuriken and firecrackers, my prosthetic now boasts a number of potent tools for a variety of situations.

ARM YOURSELF

Prosthetics and prosthetic upgrades give Sekiro useful tools for any situation. Using spirit emblems – a limited resource, mana-esque system that you can replenish at idols and collect from fallen foes – you can call upon many different abilities. Here are a few that you use early in your journey. Each can be upgraded via crafting materials to perform greatly enhanced or different effects.

Loaded Shuriken

This attachment fires shuriken that hit the target regardless of their state. Shuriken can hit running or flying foes.

Loaded Axe

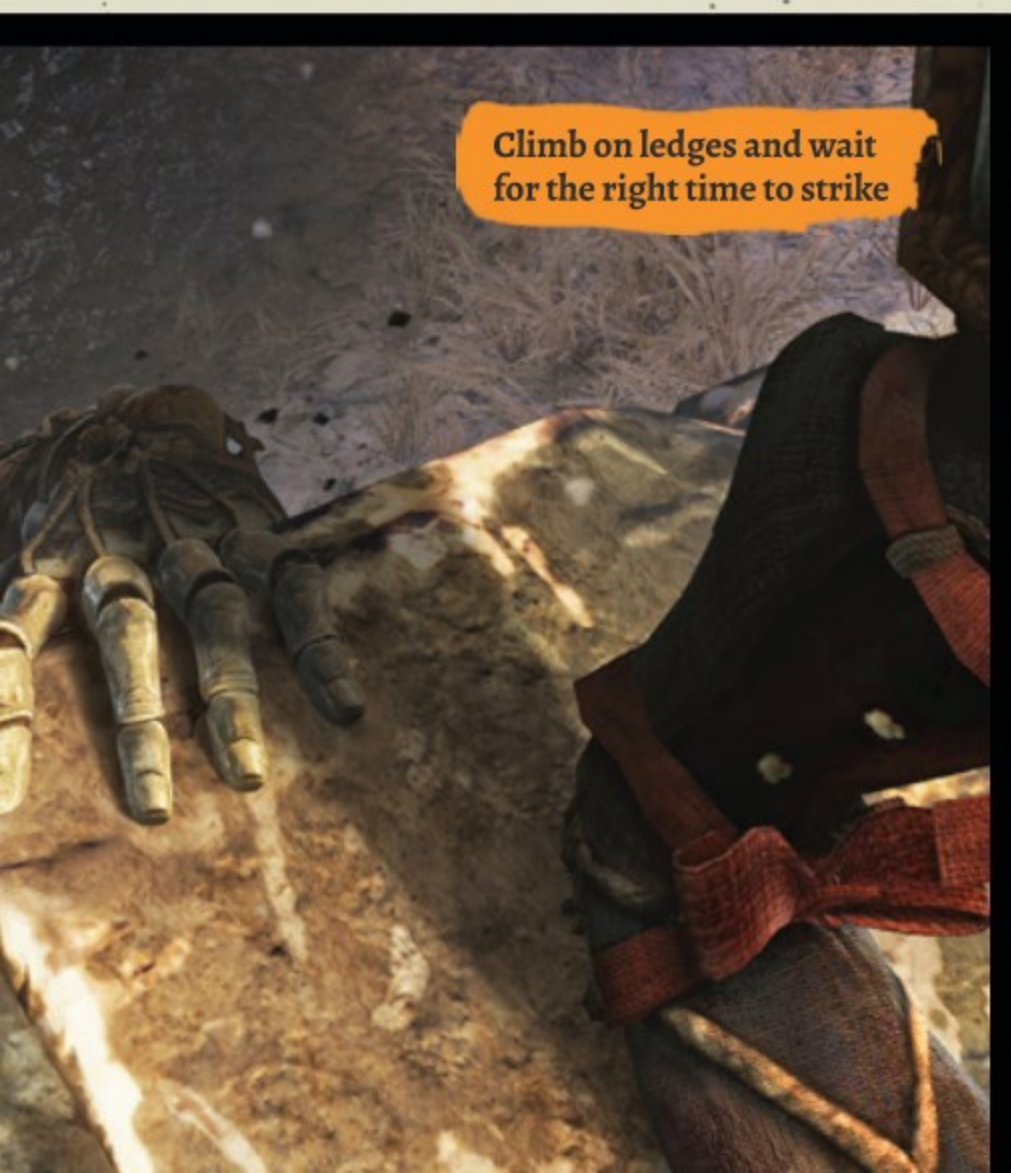
A slow weapon, but it deals tons of damage and destroys shields.

Shinobi Firecracker

A clever ninja trick that scares both humans and beasts in a wide area, resulting in stuns.

Flame Vent

Some enemies you encounter have little vulnerability to regular damage, but look for the red eyes and apply fire.



NUSTALGIA TRIP

While grappling, swimming, and stealth all add new ways to interact and bend the environment to your advantage, From Software is known for creating stages that pit the player against the environment itself. One of the more infamous areas like this is Blighttown from *Dark Souls*, a rickety pit of poison and darkness that has been echoed in many From Software games. *Sekiro* also features zones like this. In addition to the poison and fire debuffs that we faced in the Samurai Residence, we're told the toxic status (a more virulent form of poison that is extremely dangerous and found in other From games) will be featured in *Sekiro* as well. While that may cause distress for some players, at least curse (a status effect that can instantly kill a player) won't be coming back.

"We have areas where the environment plays as the enemy to the player," says From Software president Hidetaka Miyazaki. "However, one of the core concepts of *Sekiro* was to create this greater freedom of movement and freedom of traversal, and so we don't want to squash that by creating these really restrictive game spaces. So yeah, you will find somewhere like [Blighttown] – similar to that – that is a pinpoint location in the game, but we don't try to restrict the user in ways we previously did."

Sekiro also features another signature From Software highlight, with tough optional bosses that may require some exploration to find. One From Software staple we're sorry to see go is the Moonlight Greatsword, which won't be in the game (though it makes sense since you're limited to the katana).





Outnumbered? Use stealth to even the odds before engaging in direct combat



The sculptor can craft and upgrade new prosthetic options for Sekiro



THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT

Past Juzou, I find my first secret area. Sekiro doesn't have traditional illusory walls that need to be struck to discover. Instead, it contains secret shinobi walls and tunnels a player can access by sidling up against them and pushing on the wall. Some valuable rosary beads are located in this out-of-the way area, as well as a looter who tells me of a valuable treasure located in a nearby three-story pagoda. Past this little out-of-the way nook is the boss of the Samurai Estates and our first real look at a major boss from the game – the Butterfly Hag.

Before going into the boss area, a dying soldier warns that the enemy possesses “dreadful illusion techniques,” and consumables known as Snap Seeds are needed to overcome it. You need plenty of space to move around in many From action boss battles, and this one is no exception. The massive room has burning rafters and a giant Buddha statue in the back, reminding me of the final battle scene in *Ninja Scroll*. The young lord we've been charged with protecting runs up to Sekiro in a cutscene. Behind him stands the one known as Lady Butterfly, or the in-game boss name of Butterfly Hag. There's a brief exchange implying that these characters know each other, perhaps linked to Sekiro's

mentor, The Owl.

“The Owl sort of plays a foster father role to the protagonist,” Miyazaki says. “The Owl character picked up Sekiro on the battlefield and raised him as a shinobi and one of his old acquaintances – or part of that shinobi system of allies – was this lady butterfly character. So, while Owl was training the protagonist and teaching him techniques, maybe he got to spar with this character or had some sort of menial relationship with her through the foster father figure.”

After a few more brief words, she brandishes multiple kunai and the fight is on. While she may be an old woman, granny is extremely spry.

Miyazaki's initial design suggestions were for a boss that uses illusory techniques with razor thin wires to move across the map. This depiction of a strong, old Japanese ninja grandma character (which may have been slightly inspired by a character from the manga *Basilisk*) is achieved quite well in this battle, a multi-stage encounter featuring varying abilities as the fight goes on.

The Butterfly Hag leaps around the room, flinging kunai, engaging in fast melee, and attempting to land a devastating foot smash downward on Sekiro. If it lands, the player is locked into a devastating grab-style attack. As the fight goes on,

Lady Butterfly employs phantom illusions to attack Sekiro. This phase of the fight is reminiscent of the Witch of Hemwick Bloodborne encounter, but the illusions are more numerous and can be dispelled easily with the Snap Seed consumable. Illusions not dispelled by attacks or seeds in a timely fashion are channeled into deadly butterflies by the boss, which are then shot at the player with absurd speed, so beating the illusions down is critical to survival. Because everyone is playing the same character in Sekiro without different builds or multiplayer, each boss battle can be an extensively curated experience that doesn't need to worry about if a player put all their points into magic or is decked out in a heavy suit of armor. Although stealth



Stealth through environments, avoiding detection to set up kills and break up packs of enemies



and traversal are big parts of the overarching gameplay in Sekiro, the boss battles are not designed around them and feel like classic, multi-tiered From Software bosses. When the Butterfly eventually falls, we're ostensibly taken back out of the memory, along with a few story beats and items that we can't talk about yet.

"[Bosses] don't fit the new movement options or stealth," Miyazaki says. "If you were able to use the grappling hook to zip everywhere or stealth kill every boss, it would just get monotonous and boring. So we try to cater to each boss's characteristics and each character's unique traits and build a boss fight around those, and what's going to be most fun and what we want the player to experience in that one

encounter. There may be boss fights where you're up against a huge creature and you need to use the full arena and get around very quickly and use dynamism, but there may also be fights where you just need to go toe-to-toe and use every piece of kit in your arsenal and really go head-to-head on these one-on-one duels."

Miyazaki's favorite boss in the game? The president couldn't pick one, so he picked two. One is the giant ape revealed in the Tokyo Game Show trailer. The other? "You don't often see it in boss fights, they use really dirty tricks, they're real devious, real underhanded techniques," he says. "Hopefully, you'll know that one when you see it."

From what I've played, Sekiro: Shadows

Die Twice looks to have what it takes to capture fans of From Software's action/RPG stable, but will it be able to capture a whole new audience with its single-player focus and streamlined progression system? Will the game be able to take their accolades even higher with both critics and consumers? Will the game's history-infused backdrop give way to throngs of Miyazaki's mindbending creations? These are questions we won't know the answer to until March, but I'm ready to die a lot more than twice as I explore this weird, wondrous world. 🍡

For more on Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice, visit our hub at www.gameinformer.com/sekiro. You'll find exclusive interviews, video, dives into mechanics and features, and more





ES

The Top 50 Games Of 2018



Though 2018 didn't have any major console launches or technological upsets, it was far from business-as-usual. This was a year of change for the industry, as esports continued to grow and attract a mainstream audience, traditional industry fixtures like E3 were challenged with Sony announcing its departure, more developers closed their doors, and games-as-service gained a stronger foothold due in large part to the battle-royale juggernaut that is Fortnite.

A huge part of this year's deliberations involved us discussing whether or not we should make room for titles that technically launched in previous years, like Overwatch and Rainbow Six Siege, in the Top 50 based on the merits of their updates. After opening up the discussion to include our readers' input, we opted for a traditional list, focusing on games that were explicitly released this year while also acknowledging the feats of games as services as one of our sections in the feature itself.

Outside of the changing tides, 2018 also played host to an incredible amount of high-quality, even generation-defining games. God of War and Red Dead Redemption II represent what many would say are the zenith of those developers' long, storied outputs, while Insomniac's take on Spider-Man swung Marvel games to new heights. The indie scene also flourished, with challenging retro-aesthetic games like Celeste and Dead Cells and the brainteaser Return of the Obra Dinn taking center stage.

The following pages are dedicated to celebrating all the achievements at every corner of the industry, recounting its occasional heartbreaking lows, and revealing which games walked away the champions of 2018.

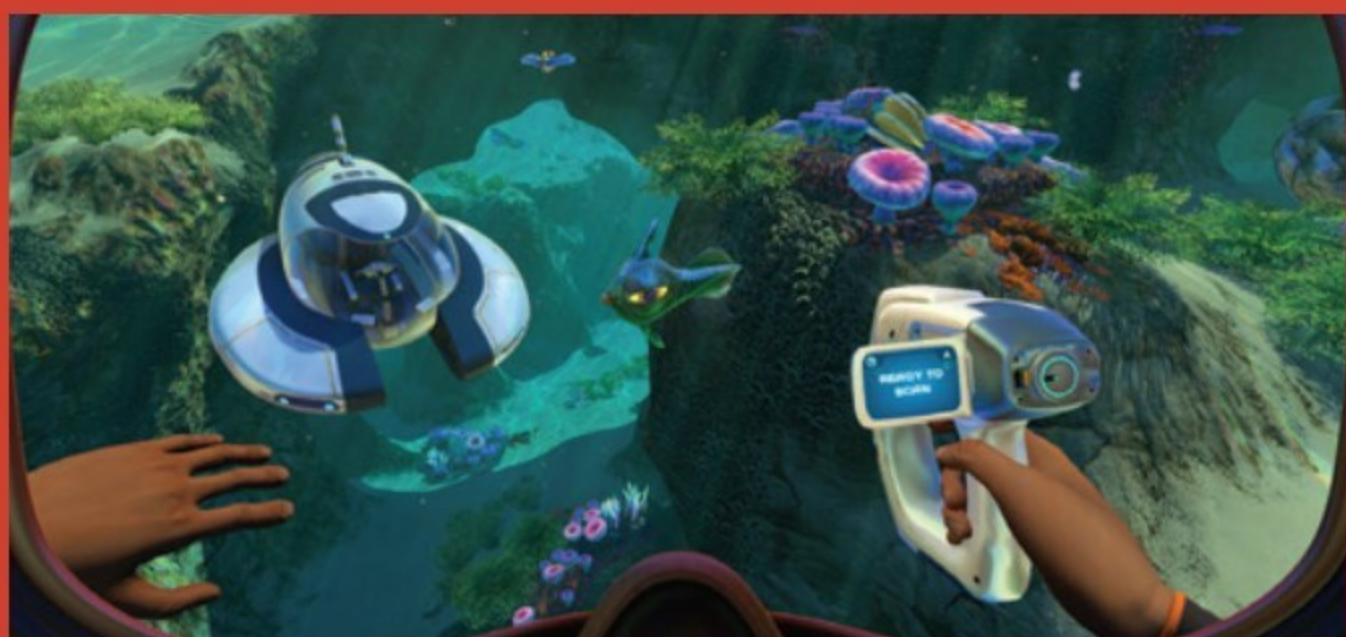
By Game Informer Staff



Iconoclasts

January 23 | PS4 • Switch • Vita • PC

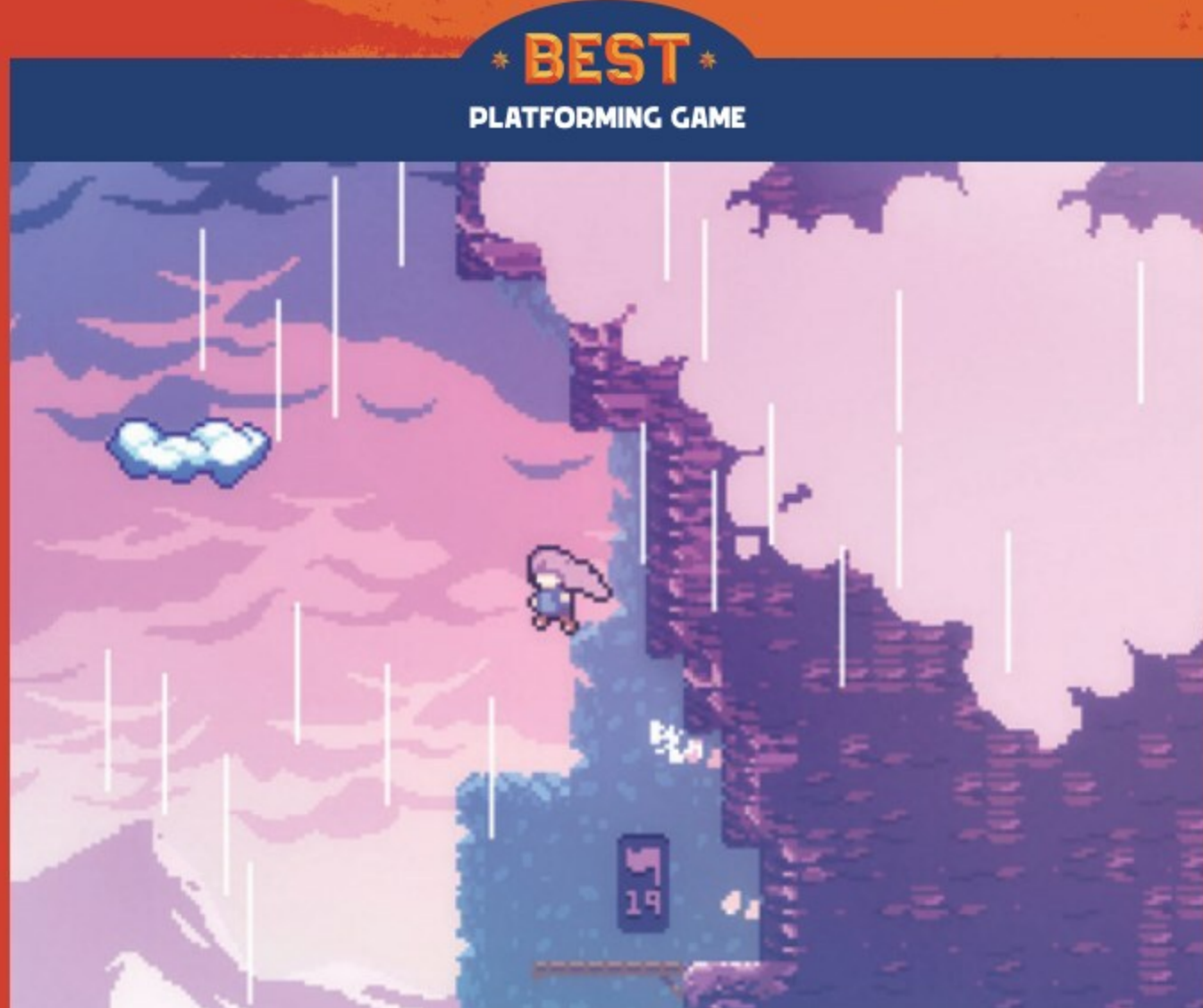
Made by lone developer Joakim Sandberg, Iconoclasts was a delightful early-2018 surprise. Taking cues from Metroid, players jump, shoot, and solve puzzles as Robin, a mechanic caught up in a war with a sinister religious authority. Iconoclasts nails its gameplay but sets itself apart with a story full of memorable heroes and sympathetic villains that examines issues like global preservation and religious zealotry. The game's final revelation also sticks with you in an impressive and frankly troubling way.



Subnautica

January 23 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Surviving this open-world underwater adventure takes wits and creativity, especially since the waters house unfamiliar and daunting creatures. After crash landing on an alien planet, you find ways to stay alive by exploring vibrant biomes, building cavernous underwater bases, scavenging supplies, and crafting tools. The most rewarding part of Subnautica is its progression, as you find blueprints and unlock new items to craft that can be as extravagant as an immense submarine.



BEST
PLATFORMING GAME



Celeste

January 25 | PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC

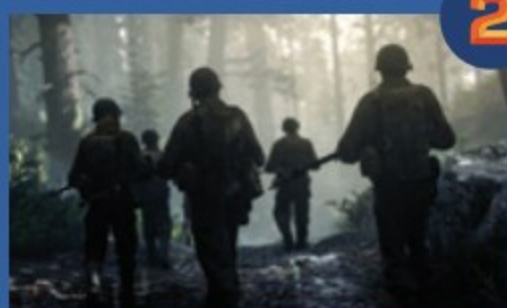
Madeline's hike up a massive mountain begins like an old-school platformer, but this journey quickly evolves into a battle against the elements as well as her own personal demons. Each area introduces a new gameplay element or twist to the mechanics, and even the hardest levels are rewarding thanks to Matt Makes Games' pixel-perfect controls. Finally, a generous number of accessibility options means that gamers from all walks of life can have a blast with this climb.

TOP 10 HEADLINES



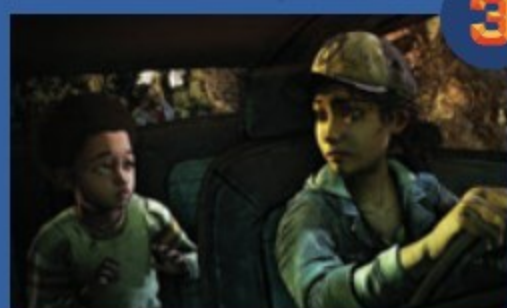
1 PlayStation Gets Out Of Conference Spotlight

Sony didn't hold its PlayStation Experience this year and pulled out of 2019's E3. This marks the end of an era, as the company has participated in E3 since 1995.



2 Call Of Duty Swatter Faces Prison Time

Tyler Barriss faces up to 25 years of prison for swatting, a harassment tactic used to call the SWAT team to another's home. This crime led to a man's death during a Call of Duty match.



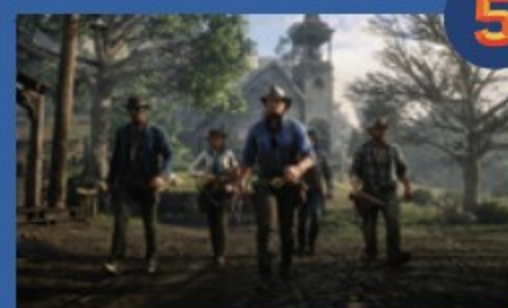
3 Several Studios Close Their Doors

Capcom Vancouver, Boss Key Productions, and Telltale Games, among others, shut down this year. Telltale's layoffs were surprising and abrupt, leading to industry-wide outrage.



4 Security At Esports Events Scrutinized After Shooting

Following a Madden 19 tournament shooting that killed two, security at gaming events have been scrutinized. GDC, E3, and PAX have vowed to make their own events safer.



5 Video Games Struggle With Company Culture

Between Rockstar's claims of 100-hour work weeks and Riot's apology after accusations of a sexist work environment, video game companies are struggling with healthy environments.



Monster Hunter: World

January 26 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Monster Hunter finally won over the West with a refined, accessible take on the classic monster-mashing formula that created the original cult following. Instead of clutching a handheld device to take on dinosaurs in lost worlds, players enjoy the modern conveniences of consoles while retaining the epic challenges and satisfying gear grind. Taking on giant creatures has never been better alone (or with a palico), but the game shines cooperatively. Constant updates keep the action flowing from monster to monster.



6

Microsoft Bolsters First Party Studios

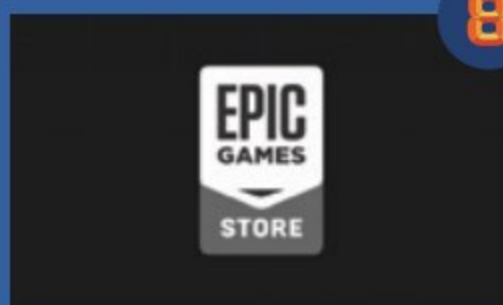
Microsoft announced acquisitions of Ninja Theory, Playground Games, Undead Labs, Compulsion Games, Obsidian Entertainment, and InXile Entertainment. The company also founded a new internal studio.



7

Ninja And Drake Smash Records On Twitch

Popular streamer Ninja and rapper Drake banded together for a Fortnite stream and broke records, bringing in over 635,000 concurrent viewers.



8

Epic Launches Digital Store

Epic Games launched its own digital store, and while the library remains limited, some developers have opted to exclusively launch on the storefront instead of Steam.



9

World Health Organization Recognizes Game Addiction

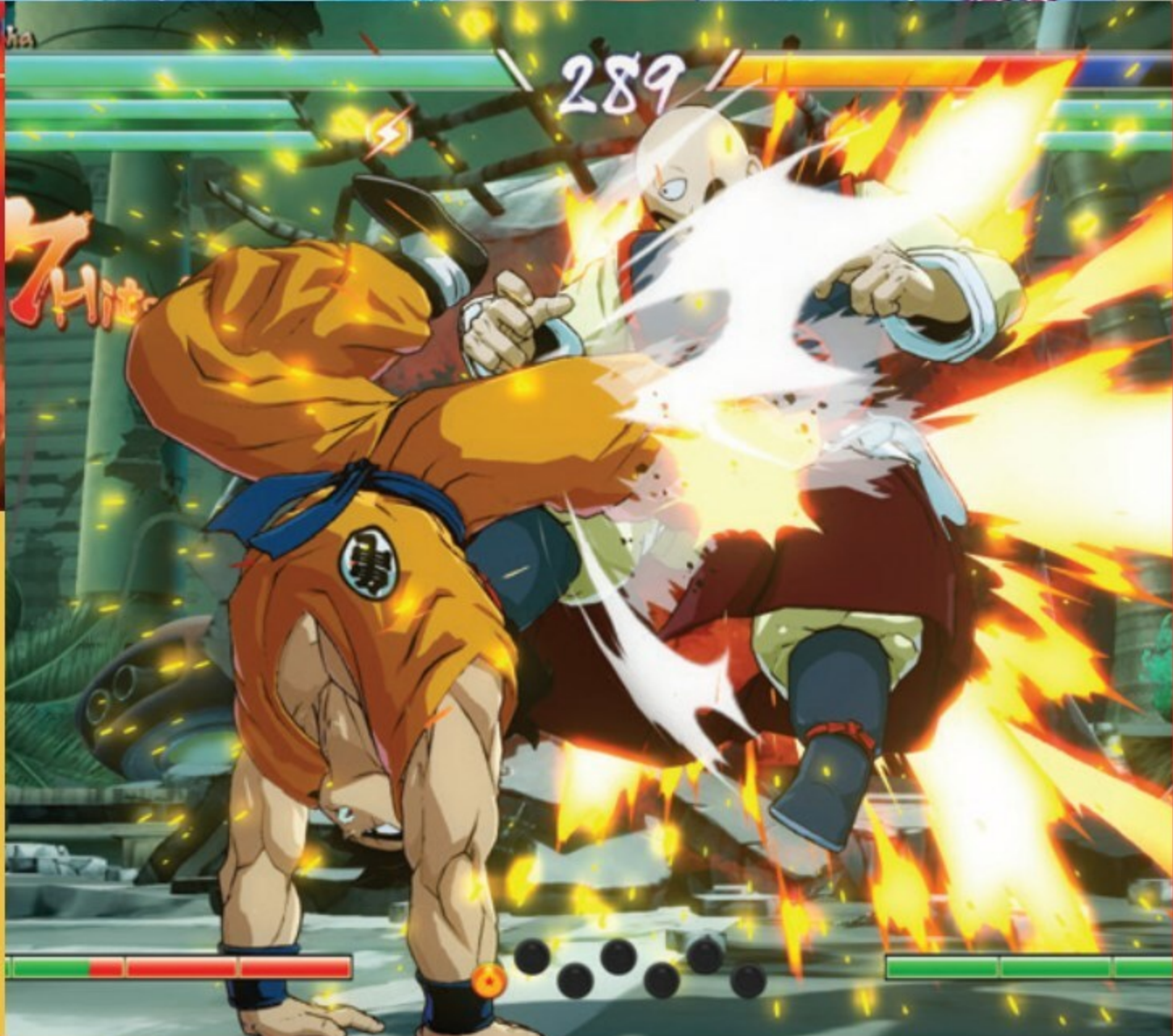
The WHO officially classified "gaming disorder" as a mental health condition, comparing the behavior to impulse-control disorders like gambling.



10

Billy Mitchell's High Scores Invalidated And Removed

High-score veteran Billy Mitchell had his scores removed by Twin Galaxies after evidence showed he was using emulation hardware to make an uneven playing field.

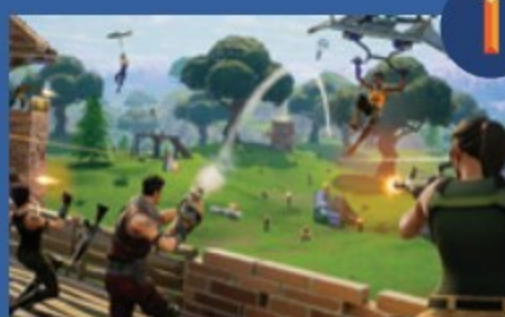


Dragon Ball FighterZ

January 26 | PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC

Dragon Ball FighterZ's devotion to its source material and gorgeous, over-the-top visuals make it every Dragon Ball fan's dream come true. As you play more of Arc System Works' fighter, you start peeling back its wonderful layers. But for all that intricacy, it never forgets the spirit of *Dragon Ball Z* lies in blowing stuff up and making it look cool. Anyone can jump into FighterZ and have that power fantasy as they slowly but surely learn the ropes, making it our fighting game of the year.

TOP 10 SUCCESSES



Fortnite Conquers The World

In addition to record-breaking streams and unprecedented pop-culture penetration, Epic Games provided meaningful updates to grow its already-massive player base.



Spider-Man Returns To Video Game Prominence

Marvel's webslinger is back in a big way. Swinging across Manhattan is pure bliss, and the story, featuring some of Marvel's most-beloved characters, is enthralling.



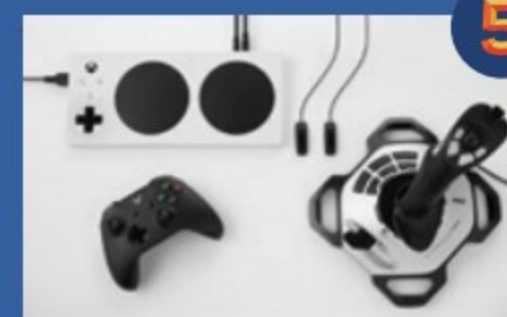
Monster Hunter Finally Gets The Attention It Deserves In America

Monster Hunter came to consoles with accessible controls and the depth fans expect, finally inserting the franchise into the American mainstream consciousness.



Red Dead Redemption II Explodes Onto The Scene

Rockstar's latest Western epic hit the ground running, launching with the biggest opening weekend in entertainment history and outselling the original game in less than two weeks.



Xbox Strives To Make Gaming For Everyone

The challenges players with disabilities face has rightfully become a larger topic for developers. Xbox's new Adaptive Controller helps a wide range of players get in on the fun.

*** BEST ***

MOBILE/HANDHELD EXCLUSIVE



art gallery

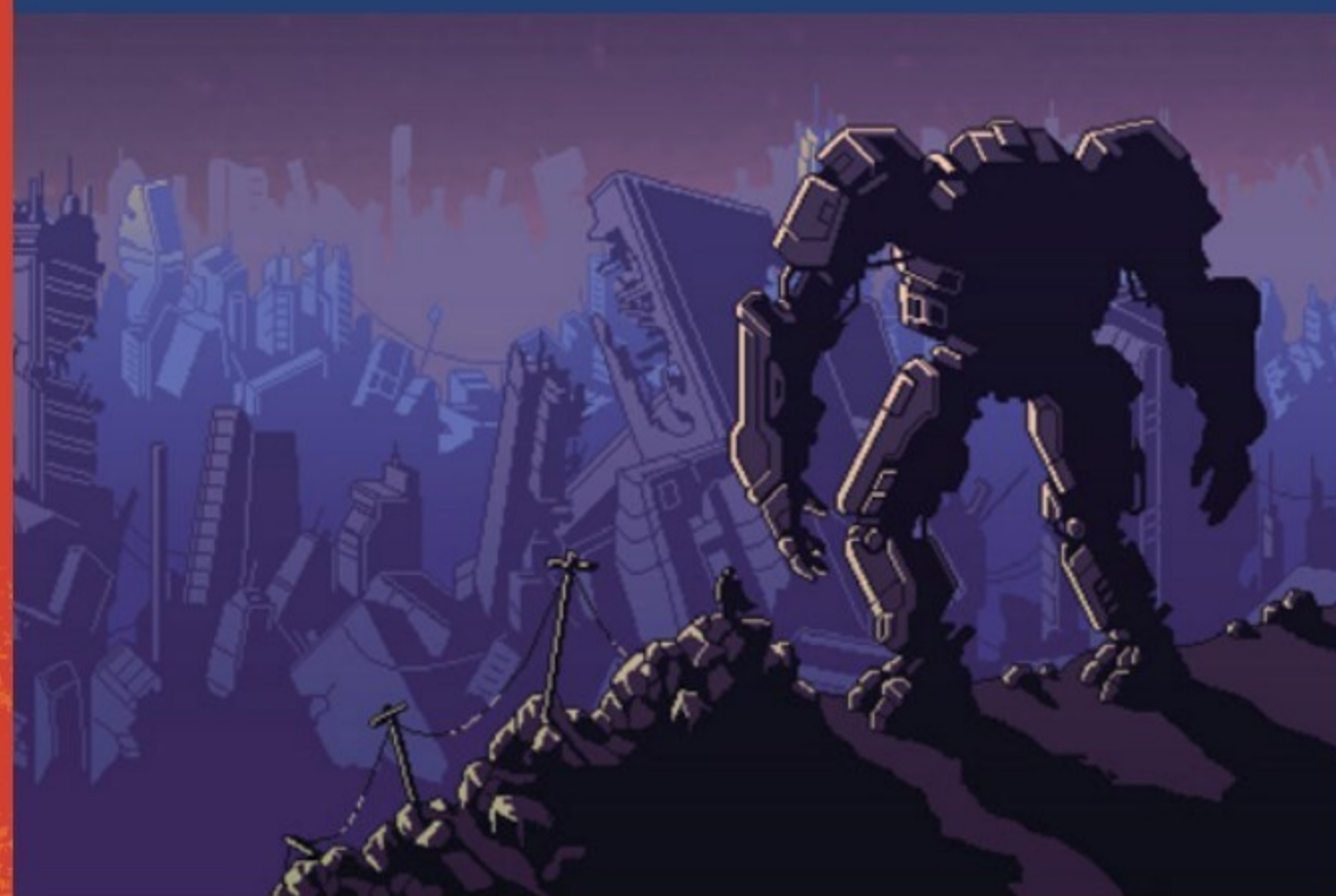
Florence

February 14 | iOS • Android

Video games often struggle to tell tales of love, whether by overshadowing them with gameplay mechanics or having them come across as disingenuous. Portraying the highs and lows of two love-stricken partners, Florence is an interactive graphic novel unafraid to tell an ordinary love story in a breathtaking way. Florence's gameplay is bare bones, but this simplicity keeps the focus on the narrative and beautiful visuals, helping it tell a compelling, honest tale.

*** BEST ***

STRATEGY GAME



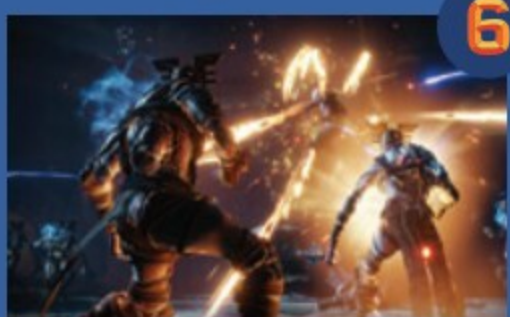
Into The Breach

February 27 | Switch • PC • Mac • Linux

As much a puzzle game as a turn-based strategy affair, Subset Games' FTL follow-up is a battle commander's dream. Players control towering mechs that must hold off giant monsters seeking to end human civilization in one compact map after the next, and every decision makes a big difference to success or failure. Enormous replay value comes from different unlockable mechs and procedurally generated levels, making this tactically sophisticated grid-combat game easy to come back to again and again.



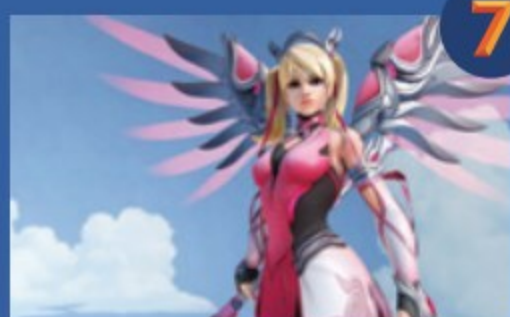
6



Destiny 2 Gives Hardcore Players Reason To Return

Following a 2017 launch that left many hardcore Destiny fans wanting more, Bungie reworked key components of the hobby experience to reinvigorate its dedicated player base.

7



Blizzard Encourages Gamers To Give Back

In just two weeks, Blizzard raised more than \$12 million for breast cancer research through the sale of a limited-edition Overwatch skin for Mercy.

8



IO Interactive's Hitman Renaissance

After releasing 2016's Hitman under Square Enix, IO Interactive bought its independence, retaining rights to its IP. Hitman 2 proved IO is the right studio to continue the franchise.

9



SonicFox Has A Great Year

One of the most well-known esports competitors won his fourth Evo crown before capturing hearts with an impassioned speech at The Game Awards, where he took home "Esports Player of the Year."

10



Cyberpunk 2077 Steals The Show At E3

The team behind The Witcher finally pulled back the curtains on its upcoming dystopian open-world adventure. It's still early, but Cyberpunk 2077 looks well worth the wait.



Yakuza 6: The Song Of Life

February 27 | PS4

Kazuma Kiryu's tale concludes in Yakuza 6, but the Dragon of Dojima doesn't go out quietly. Song of Life has the same hard-hitting action and melodramatic storytelling fans have come to expect, and the final chapter does a service to the character we've grown to love. It's easy to delay the goodbye thanks to a dizzying array of side activities such as spearfishing, baseball-team management, and a questline that has you becoming the most popular guy at the bar.

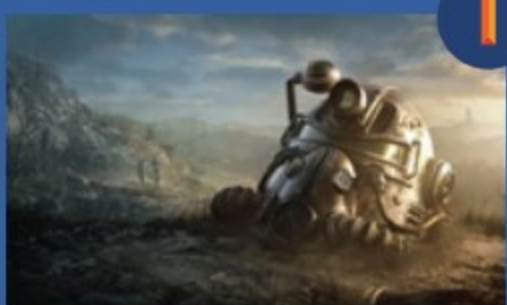
Where The Water Tastes Like Wine

February 28 | PC • Mac

Where The Water Tastes Like Wine is a celebration of storytelling in many ways. Taking place in Depression-era America, you roam from state to state collecting stories. These compelling folk tales are overheard, experienced yourself, or told by campfire as you explore the countryside's old mills and the cities' bustling streets. What's most fascinating is how storytelling acts as a game mechanic, serving as the currency you trade amongst travelers, whom in return open up and share their own heartfelt tale.



TOP 10 DISAPPOINTMENTS



Fallout Seventy Sucks

Fallout 76's reveal was met with heavy cynicism, and the fans who gave it a shot paid for their optimism. Even by Bethesda standards, Fallout 76 launched a buggy, broken mess.



The Diablo No Mortal Wanted

How do you upset a sea of diehard Blizzcon attendees? By forgoing a Diablo IV announcement for a free-to-play mobile spinoff. That works for Command & Conquer too, by the way.



Final Fantasy XV Roadmap Leads To Ruin

Fans had high expectations for FF XV's anniversary livestream, none of which included the cancellation of upcoming DLC and resignation of series director Hajime Tabata.



Microsoft's First-Party Failures

Sony's killer exclusives this year only underscored Microsoft's abysmal first-party lineup. Sea of Thieves and State of Decay 2 weren't just flawed – they felt unfinished.



Call Of Duty's Campaign Goes AWOL

Sure, Black Ops 4's cornucopia of multiplayer options turned out great, but lots of fans only play COD for the bombastic solo campaign. This year they were simply out of luck.

Warhammer: Vermintide II

March 8 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

In a world that sees no shortage of Left 4 Dead clones, progression systems and big boss encounters keep Vermintide II a cut above the cooperative competition. One of the first games to lean into Twitch integration, players can have chat spice things up with all kinds of modifiers and encounters during their play sessions for additional challenge and surprises. Slaughtering endless waves of Skaven has never been so fun.



Ni No Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom

March 23 | PS4 • PC

When creating its highly anticipated sequel, Level-5 didn't simply give players more of the same. The developer took risks, revamping the battle system from turn-based to real-time, introducing a great new kingdom-building element, and crafting a vastly different and darker tale. What the game does retain from the original is the gorgeous Studio-Ghibli-inspired visuals and the imaginative landscapes.



Minit

April 3 | PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC • Mac

This adventure brings a whole new meaning to speedrunning. With only 60-second lifespans, you have limited intervals to explore the monochrome but engrossing world. Progression is made by solving puzzles and finding new checkpoints, such as discovering a water can that extinguishes fiery obstacles and flippers that let you swim to previously inaccessible areas. Minit's world has many secrets along with plenty of hilarious gags.



PlayStation Classic Is A Nostalgia Killer

Nintendo's NES/SNES Classic set a high bar for retro consoles, and Sony sailed right under it. From ugly menus to emulation issues, the PlayStation Classic is a cheap cash-in.



Electronic Arts Bungles Battlefield V Rollout

From a mysterious new co-op mode to its own take on battle royale, Battlefield V's most-touted features still aren't in the game. Is it any surprise sales are down?



Prima Games Closes Shop

Prima Games' closure is sad in its own right, but as the largest strategy guide publisher, it also marks the end of a beloved era. Online walkthroughs just aren't the same.



Nintendo Switch Online Underwhelms

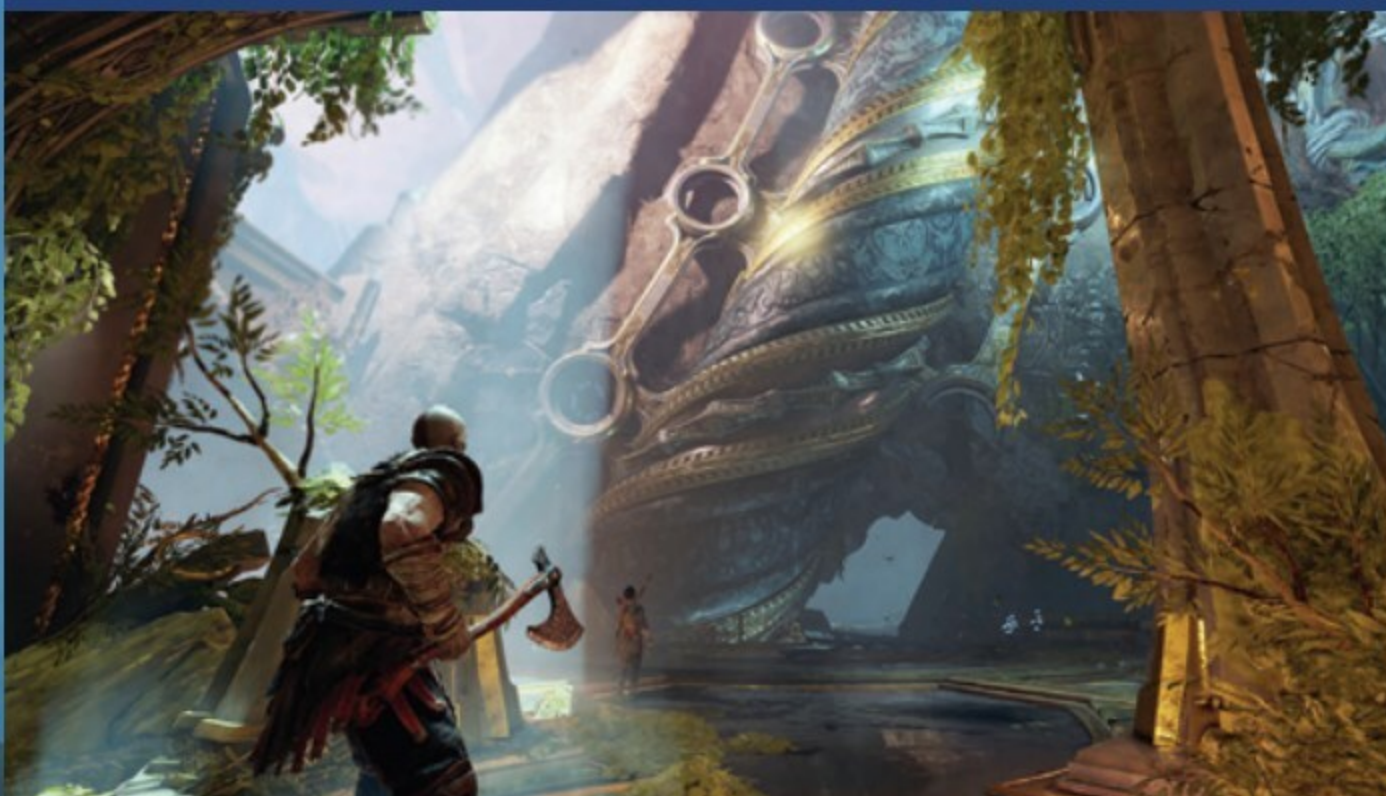
The only change Switch Online introduced is Splatoon 2 players are now paying for multiplayer. A few old NES games don't sweeten the deal – just give us back Virtual Console!



Mega Man II's Stupid Boss Doors

Look, when Mega Man jumps into a boss door, he's supposed to freeze in midair as the room transitions, not plop on the ground like trash. Do you even get Mega Man, Capcom?!





God Of War

April 20 | PS4

For more than a decade, Kratos' rage was legendary. The entire God of War series was built on unbridled fury, with Kratos leaving the bodies of mutilated gods and beasts in his wake. While this resulted in a collection of successful installments, the Ghost of Sparta's quest for revenge became predictable, and his shouts of anger grew too familiar over time. Gamers thought they knew what to expect from God of War – until Sony's Santa Monica studio revitalized the franchise with a new vision for the future.

God of War on PlayStation 4 brings Kratos back, but not how we remember him. He is quiet, deliberate, and restrained. He has left Greek mythology behind and resides in the Norse world. Instead of slicing through his problems with flaming blades, an ice-infused axe is his weapon of choice. Rather than a quest for revenge, he is on a journey with his son to say goodbye to a loved one. The adventure has an emotional core that adds weight to the stylish action, and all of these elements converge in a remarkable and surprising experience that wins our Game of the Year honor.

God of War isn't just amazing because it breathes new life into an old series. It also pushes third-person combat forward, balancing a suite of

satisfying abilities against a battlefield full of challenging foes. Throw your axe into a shambling Draugr to freeze it in place, then watch it shatter as your weapon magically flies back into your hand with a satisfying thunk. Manage threats and prioritize targets with help from Atreus, who stuns targets and primes them for brutal finishers. Upgrade your equipment and skills with an RPG-like progression system, and unleash magic attacks that call down meteors from the sky and conjure spectral beasts. Through all of this spectacle, a cinematic, no-cut camera gives players a thrilling and intimate angle on the action.

Whether you're listening to the tales of Mimir while rowing through Midgard or fighting a terrifying beast from Norse mythology, God of War is packed with memorable moments. Sometimes they involve explosive boss fights, and sometimes they focus on the silence between two characters. Loud and quiet, big and small – God of War finds the perfect balance to punctuate its gameplay and cutscenes.

Our Game of the Year discussions were especially difficult this year, but with God of War's exceptional combination of ambition, polish, and entertainment, it climbs to the top of the mountain.

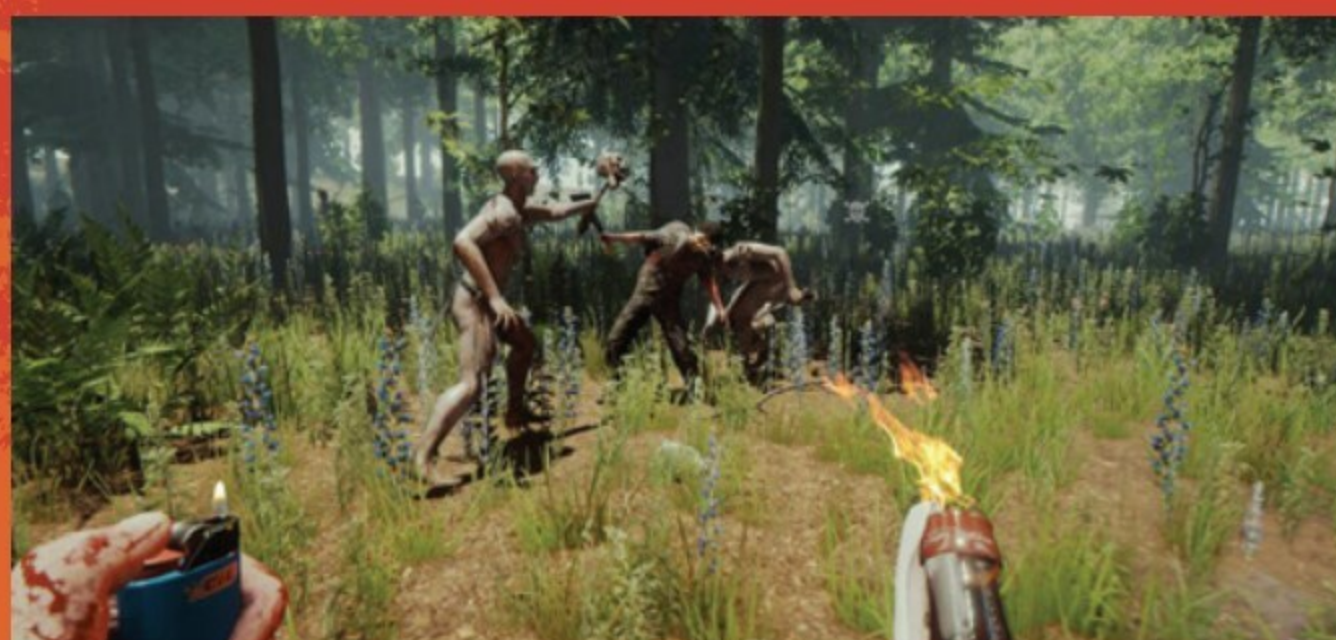
BEST SIMULATION GAME



Frostpunk

April 24 | PC

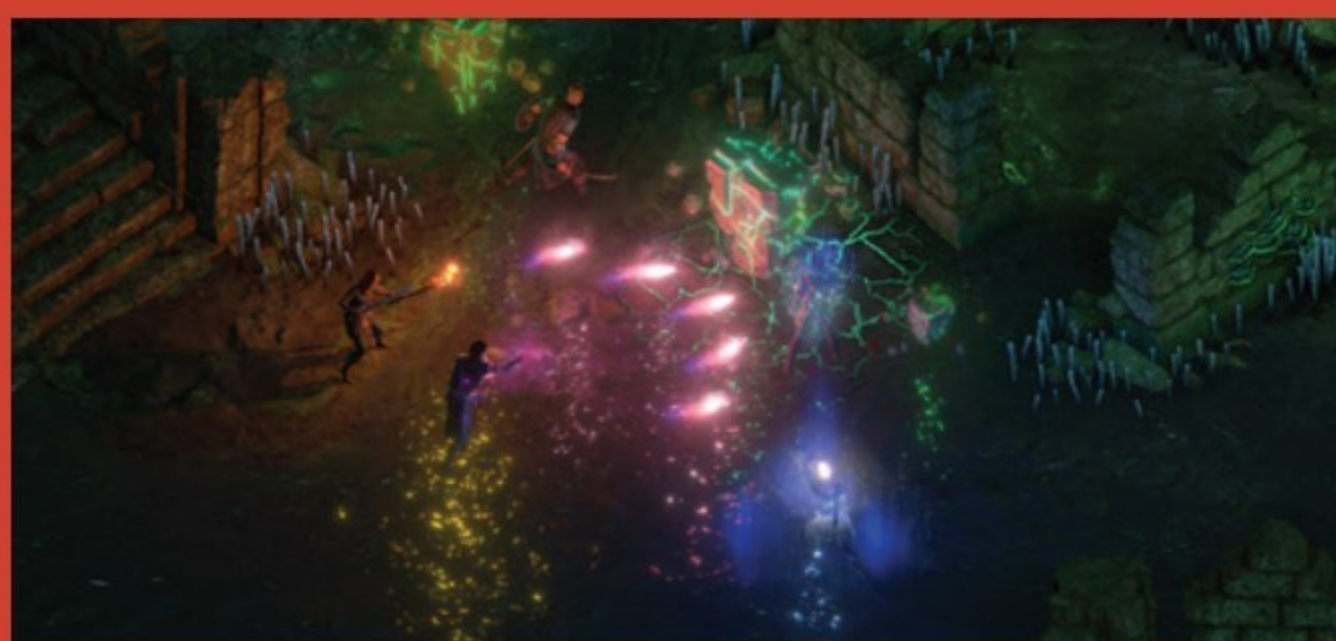
This War of Mine creators 11 bit Studios' frigid, unrelenting survival sim asks players to guide a resource-starved city through the onset of an ice age. Something's got to give as the temperature drops, people start getting sick, and discontent sets in; leaders face increasingly difficult decisions of how they will compromise their utopian beliefs and deal with the unpleasant reality of the situation. If you survive the storm, you may find yourself asking whether the cost was worth the effort.



The Forest

April 30 | PS4 • PC

Endnight Games made the most of The Forest's long-gestating early access period, with the final product emerging as a fascinating blend of survival sandbox and horror. As a father trapped on a tropical island after a plane crash, you must survive long enough to find your son. To do that, you have to build houses from lumber, hunt animals, and fashion weapons to take on the island's deadly foes. Difficult and terrifying in equal measure, The Forest is one of this year's surprising gems.



Pillars Of Eternity II: Deadfire

May 8 | PC • Mac • Linux

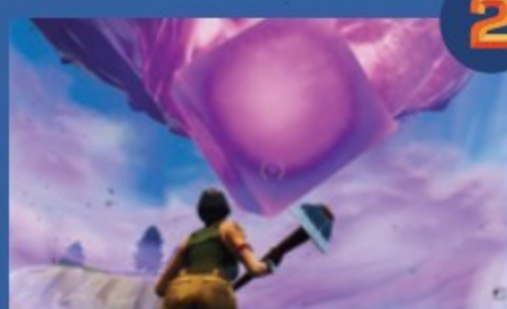
Obsidian's isometric fantasy does just what we like to see in a sequel – maintain the core gameplay, follow up on narrative elements, and stand apart with new mechanics and setting. Players venture onto the high seas in this grand adventure, fighting pirates and dragons while balancing the desires of a variety of fascinating factions. Rich storytelling and thoughtfully crafted combat make this the definitive RPG in 2018 for fans of the classic style popularized by Baldur's Gate.

TOP 10 MOMENTS



Going Back Home (God of War)

Kratos' new adventure had a lot of amazing moments but few could dispute his voyage into the past, complete with an appearance from an old friend, was this journey's peak.



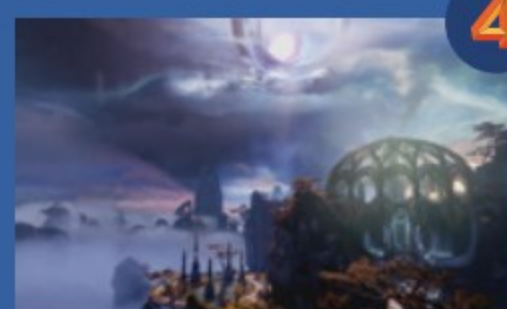
Loot Lake (Fortnite)

Fortnite was the game to beat this year thanks to its constant changes. The mysterious cube that appeared above the lake was easily the biggest chapter in Fortnite's saga so far.



Drinking With Lenny (Red Dead Redemption II)

Red Dead shines best when focusing on its memorable characters. Arthur's night of drunken debauchery with LENNY was the most hilarious sequence we saw all year long.



The Revelation Of The Dreaming City (Destiny 2: Forsaken)

After the raid was finished, the gamespace itself also began to radically change from week to week, proving that Destiny could shine once more as a service title.



The Real Estate Tour (Hitman 2)

Disguised as a real estate agent, 47 gives a tour to his target. The stilted delivery of his selling points – which includes how easy it is to clean blood off the floor – are comedic gold.

Far: Lone Sails

May 17 | PC • Mac

A traveler crosses an unforgiving landscape of bleak ruins, his only companion the massive mechanical conveyance that keeps him moving across the wastes. In a game filled with discrete problems like hail storms and engines catching fire, Far: Lone Sails combines elements of survival games with the unmistakable feeling of a road trip. Lonely and contemplative, it's the perfect pacing and evocative setting that help this strange journey follow its own road.



Detroit: Become Human

May 25 | PS4

Detroit takes our dependence on technology and paints a horrifying future where androids are slaves to humanity's every whim. Looking at the issue from the perspectives of three different androids, we see how far that abuse of power can go. Making tough decisions and watching relationships grow are highlights, but the biggest achievement is the vast amount of choices and how far-reaching they are. This ambition and success can't be ignored, even if the heavy-handed narrative has its share of plot holes.



Stranger Battle (God of War)

God of War's opening fight is a rock-em-sock-em battle rivaling the likes of anything in Marvel's films. It's easily the most awe-inspiring spectacle in a game filled with them.



Surviving The Freeze (Frostpunk)

If you're lucky enough to survive Frostpunk's catastrophic storm, you'll find no parade, only haunting moments of reflection about the steep moral cost of leadership.



Confronting The Truth (The Missing: J.J. Macfield and the Island of Memories)

To say too much about The Missing's fantastic story would spoil it, so we'll just say that the game's finale is a hell of a punch and one you must see to believe.



The Final Song (Tetris Effect)

There is perhaps no other game this year that uses music to better effect than Tetris Effect. The finale is both challenging and a masterful emotional symphony.



Let's Party Like It's 1899 (Red Dead Redemption II)

The heartwarming refuges of Red Dead's bleak story were fantastic celebrations around the campfire, where we watched our gang of ruffians let loose with song and drink.



Yoku's Island Express

May 29 | PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC

The odd combination of open-world exploration, pinball, and all things Metroid turn Yoku's Island Express into one of the year's most unique experiences. Knocking around a beetle attached to a petrified ball of feces is a surprisingly engaging experience that tests your pinball reflexes as you try to unearth the secrets buried on an island. If there's even one drop of pinball or Metroid fandom in your blood, give Yoku's Island Express a play, as it scratches both itches in charming and fun ways.



Jurassic World Evolution

June 12 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Frontier Developments has a long history of making theme park games, and the Jurassic World license ended up being a great fit for this studio. The unruly dinosaurs are rightfully the attraction, as they can turn tourists into hearty meals in a second flat, but building their habitats is also rewarding, as you need to keep the dinos as happy as the guests. Jurassic World Evolution is a fun tour through the Jurassic series. You even get to hear Jeff Goldblum warn you that bad things are going to happen.



The Awesome Adventures Of Captain Spirit

June 26 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Acting as a bridge between Life is Strange and its sequel, The Awesome Adventures of Captain Spirit endears with its story of a young boy named Chris and his complicated relationship with his alcoholic father. Taking place in a suburban home and centering on the boy's wild imagination, Captain Spirit successfully makes the mundane feel extraordinary. Seeing the world through Chris' eyes transforms normal objects like a water heater into a heinous monster and the family car into a spaceship, making for a fascinating adventure.

TOP 10 CHARACTERS



Arthur Morgan
(Red Dead Redemption II)

Arthur Morgan is the first to admit that he's done some bad things, but underneath that gruff exterior is a complex hero with a lifetime of heartache and a strong sense of loyalty.



Dutch Van Der Linde
(Red Dead Redemption II)

Dutch begins the game as a charismatic leader, but his tortured fall from grace slowly reveals a darker persona. As an antagonist, Dutch remains intimidating, but he also never lacks panache.



Kratos
(God of War)

In the past, Kratos was very one-note. However, fatherhood softened that anger, giving us a more nuanced take on the battle-hardened warrior who is often at odds with himself.



Peter Parker
(Spider-Man)

Insomniac's take on the shy, awkward nerd tackling a city full of problems reminded us why Marvel's iconic superhero remains one of the most enduring characters in pop culture.



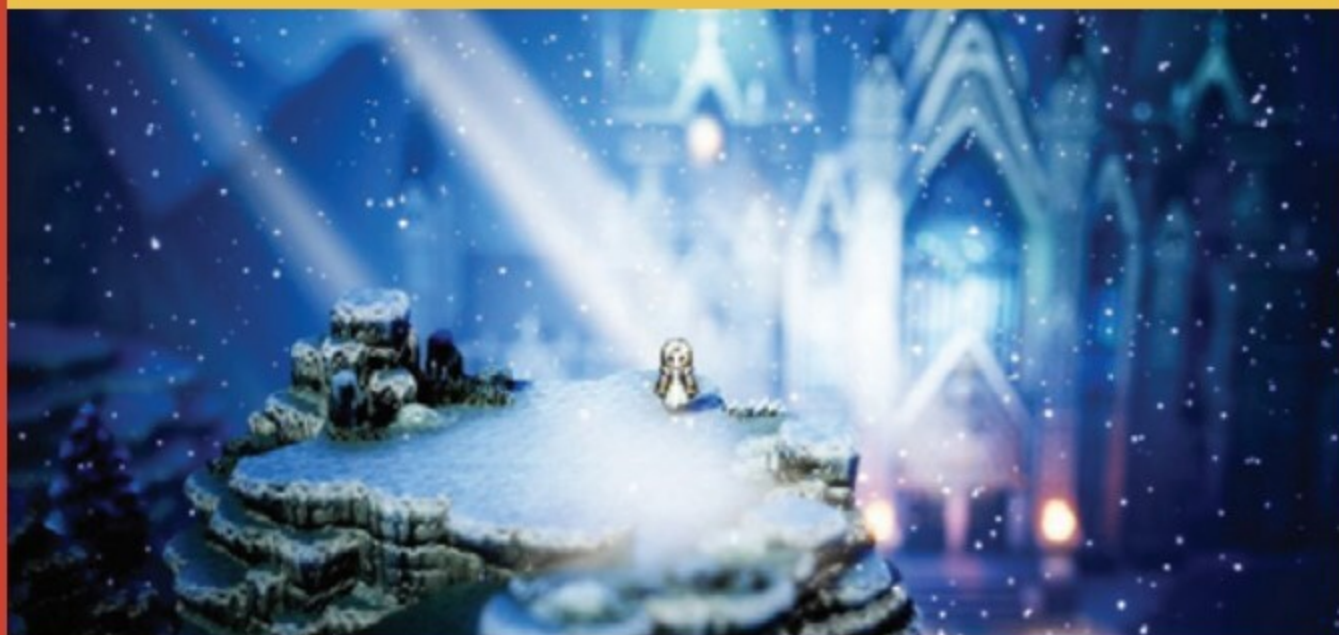
Meve
(Thronebreaker: The Witcher Tales)

The disgraced queen of Lyria and Rivia is incredibly strong-willed. Her refusal to compromise puts her in several tough spots, but her will to overcome these obstacles is truly inspiring.

Octopath Traveler

July 13 | Switch

Octopath Traveler is a retro RPG with a modern sheen, and it immediately ensnares players with a dream-like, pixelated art style. But this game's beauty is more than just skin-deep. The challenging turn-based combat and a fun job system are enough to surprise seasoned role-playing veterans, and an episodic structure gives all eight protagonists time in the spotlight. Square Enix and Acquire make clever additions to a traditional formula providing an old-school fix unlike any other.



Dead Cells

August 6 | PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC

Dead Cells is a challenging rogue-lite that rewards the player better than most games of its ilk. It's one of the more forgiving and approachable roguelikes out there, and the razor-sharp combat and wealth of weapons make it a blast to play. After each death, don't be surprised if you get caught in the dangerous loop of saying, "just one more run." Given how Dead Cells makes time fly by, it is one of the *Game Informer* staff's favorite games to play on flights.



BEST
MMO



World Of Warcraft: Battle For Azeroth

August 14 | PC

Battle for Azeroth doesn't reinvent the groundbreaking systems and features introduced in the Legion expansion, but it dutifully keeps things on a solid path of success. The new artifact system is divisive, but world quests, mythic dungeons, warfronts, and island expeditions ensure players always have something to do. Allied races and heritage armor give hardcore players something to strive for and show off, and the story takes us ever closer to what is sure to be an epic conclusion for the Alliance and Horde.



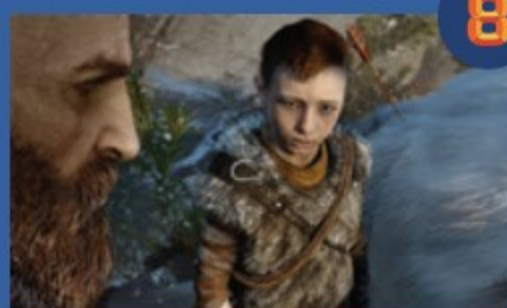
Kassandra
(Assassin's Creed Odyssey)

Alexios was an option, but his sister completely stole the show. Kassandra exudes confidence and dignity, and despite her tough exterior she always has a soft spot for the underprivileged.



Roland
(Ni No Kuni II)

Roland isn't your traditional fantasy-themed anime hero. The jaw-dropping reveal of this tortured ruler's otherworldly origins motivated us to see his journey to the end.



Atreus
(God of War)

Kratos' son acts like a spoiled teenager at times, but after his baptism by fire, we were grateful to have this young warrior at our side. Like any good son, he filled us with pride.



The Joker
(Batman: The Enemy Within)

Despite the many iterations of The Joker over Batman's nearly 80-year history, Telltale's origin story stands tall as one of the most humanizing portraits of the legendary psychopath.



Sadie Adler
(Red Dead Redemption II)

When we first met Sadie, she seemed like a feeble, even helpless, settler's wife, but she quickly proved to be one of the most capable and likeable members of the entire Van der Linde gang.



Destiny 2: Forsaken

September 4 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

In partnership with High Moon Studios, Bungie had some big expectations to fulfill with this expansion. Thankfully, Forsaken's Western-inspired campaign is a breath of fresh air, with compelling storytelling, fun bosses, and plenty of rewards to chase. Upon the completion of a massive new raid, a new endgame zone responded in real-time with a rotating cycle of fresh content that has kept players invested for months. Players ultimately got what they wanted – a hobby worth their enormous time investment.



Guacamelee 2

August 21 | PS4 • Switch • PC

Guacamelee 2 picks up where the original left off, with protagonist Juan having to put on the mask again to help save his world and the myriad overlapping dimensions causing problems. The result is a well-designed, Metroid-style platformer with fun melee combat, a great sense of humor, and a surprising amount of heart. Seeing the trials Juan must endure to save the world and reunite with his family is engaging, and beating up bad guys is consistently fun and challenging in a way that's never unfair.



Dragon Quest XI: Echoes Of An Elusive Age

September 4 | PS4 • PC

The longest-running JRPG franchise returned with aplomb to celebrate its 30th anniversary. Featuring a well-developed cast, Dragon Quest XI captures the thrill of being an adventurer, whether you're taking down a challenging baddie or finally crafting super-powerful gear. All the while, the classic elements remind you why you fell in love with RPGs in the first place. Dragon Quest XI takes steps in the right direction, while still staying true to the series' roots.

TOP 10 DORKS



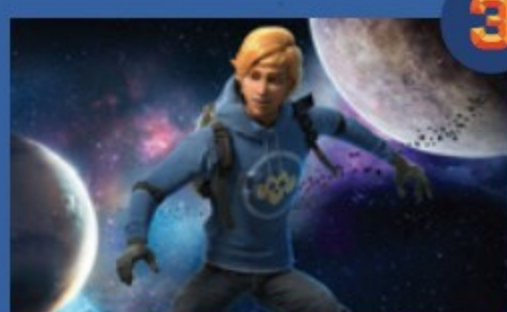
Uncle
(Red Dead Redemption II)

Every outlaw gang has an Uncle – the guy who will do anything to help. As long as “anything” only includes drinking whiskey, taking naps, and complaining about lumbago.



Spider-Cop
(Spider-Man)

Spider-Man lobs some cheesy lines, but his dorkiest involve Spider-Cop. The grizzled, seen-too-much detective persona walks the line between lovable and annoying.



Levi McCray
(Starlink: Battle for Atlas)

Levi is an attention-hungry extreme sports athlete and internet celebrity. Look at his face. Imagine his voice. If you haven't punched this page yet, your dork-o-meter is busted.



Connor
(Detroit: Become Human)

In the future, humanity creates lifelike androids to fulfill many roles. They can be housekeepers, babysitters, or (as Connor proves) awkward poindexters.



Lancer
(Deltarune)

You can't really take villains seriously when they ask you for advice about how to be better antagonists. When Lancer eventually joins your party, he doesn't get any smarter.



Spider-Man

September 4 | PS4

Spider-Man has dabbled in video games since the Atari 2600, but we're just now seeing what he is truly capable of in this medium. Swinging across the city with grace and precision is enthralling, and it immediately makes you feel like a hero. That feeling extends to combat, which empowers the player with a variety of acrobatic moves and state-of-the-art toys. The gameplay may scream of superhuman feats, but the story flips the script and focuses on what makes Peter Parker such an interesting character.



BEST
SPORTS GAME



NBA 2K19

September 11 | PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC

Visual Concepts celebrates the series' 20th anniversary in style with another stellar effort worthy of our Sports Game of the Year award. No other sports game can hang with 2K19's polished gameplay, first-class presentation, and breadth of play options. Whether you want to dominate the courts online, become an NBA legend, build a franchise dynasty, or put together an unbeatable fantasy lineup, this hoops suite offers well-crafted options that should keep you occupied well into the offseason.

Valkyria Chronicles 4

September 25 | PS4 • Xbox One • Switch

Capturing what fans loved about the original entry, Sega triumphantly brings Valkyria Chronicles back to consoles after the series' hiatus on handheld. Strategic battles encourage players to look at maps more like puzzles than war zones, using a squad of interesting heroes to advance. New features (like the grenadier class) join returning staples, putting a unique twist on classic tactics. Even with familiar elements, Valkyria Chronicles 4 is an immensely satisfying evolution.



6

Sindri (God of War)

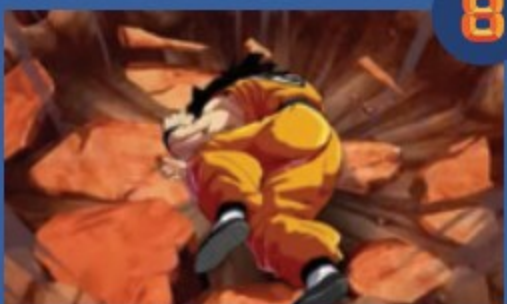
This dwarf is partly responsible for forging legendary artifacts. But he's also responsible for barfing every time he thinks about those artifacts being used for violence.



7

Slow Talker (Minit)

Your time in Minit is limited, and this turtle-thing traps you with agonizingly slow dialogue. You watch the seconds of your life tick away, wondering if he will ever fini...



8

Yamcha (Dragon Ball FighterZ)

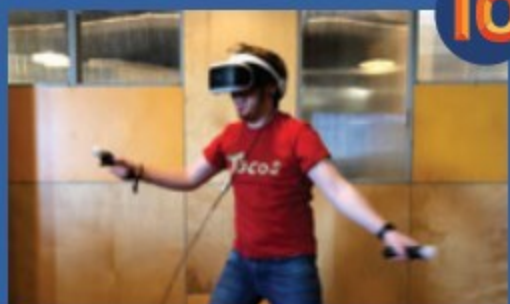
In a game full of godlike super-beings, Yamcha does one thing well: He gets beat up a lot. If you want a pathetic fighter even minions can defeat, then he is your champion.



9

Taye (The Quiet Man)

Trying hard to be cool is the #1 thing cool people never do. It's also the only thing Taye does. You probably didn't play The Quiet Man, so just take our word for this one.



10

You (Beat Saber)

As you slash through blocks in sync with the beat, you may think you look like an awesome musical samurai. You don't. You look like you're fighting bees while getting tasered.

*** BEST ***

RACING GAME • MICROSOFT EXCLUSIVE



Forza Horizon 4

September 26 | Xbox One • PC

Forza Horizon 4 turns Great Britain into the ultimate playground for cars. As you roar through cornfields, smash through centuries-old barriers, and launch off of some of the biggest jumps in games, you are continually rewarded with new cars, races, and things to do. While most of the campaign races have an over-the-top arcade flavor to them, our racing game of the year from Playground Games also offers deep tuning options, a steady stream of new content, and plenty of customization.



Astro Bot Rescue Mission

October 2 | PSVR

Mario is king when it comes to 3D platformers, but Astro Bot Rescue Mission proves he doesn't have a monopoly on the genre. Bursting with creativity and joy, Astro Bot is a game that would be great outside of virtual reality as well, but the headset elevates the experience and improves it. Whether you're fighting a giant robotic ape or exploring a haunted swamp with a head-mounted flashlight, Astro Bot is consistently a blast and a must-play for anyone who has invested in Sony's VR tech.



Mega Man 11

October 2 | PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC

Before Mega Man 11, hardcore fans had lamented the absence of the Blue Bomber for nearly a decade. With the new game, Capcom set out to create a new generation of Mega Man enthusiasts while retaining the faithful fans who started playing the game in the late '80s. To Capcom's credit, the game is good enough to accomplish both feats. Mega Man 11 maintains the challenge of the original games for those who want it, but newcomers can also enjoy the charming 2D platformer full of fun levels, bosses, and abilities.

TOP 10 PUBLISHERS



Sony Interactive Entertainment
(Last Year: 3)

Sony's delivered two blockbusters with God of War and Spider-Man. Detroit: Become Human and Astro Bot Rescue Mission were also Top 50 honorees.



Take-Two Interactive
(Last Year: 9)

Take Two's "less is more" approach paid major dividends thanks to stellar performances from Red Dead Redemption II, NBA 2K19, and Civilization VI: Rise & Fall.



Activision Blizzard
(Last Year: 4)

Call of Duty: Black Ops 4, World of Warcraft: Battle for Azeroth, and Destiny 2: Forsaken stole the headlines, but Hearthstone and Overwatch also had strong support years.



Bandai Namco
(Last Year: N/A)

Bandai Namco dominated the fighting genre with strong performances from Dragon Ball FighterZ and Soulcalibur VI. Ni No Kuni II and Dark Souls Remastered also impressed.



Nintendo
(Last Year: 1)

Following a Mario and Zelda year is tough, but Nintendo held its own with Super Smash Bros. Ultimate, Octopath Traveler, Pokémon: Let's Go, Mario Tennis Aces, and Labo.

*** BEST ***
ROLE-PLAYING GAME



Assassin's Creed Odyssey

October 5 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

No single Assassin's Creed game can include every element fans love about the series, but Odyssey strikes an especially smart balance. Sailing, modern-day mysteries, great combat, and gorgeous scenery – Ubisoft Quebec fits all of that and more into Ancient Greece. The world is full of rewarding activities, whether you're just exploring or actively pursuing evil cultists. Even after dozens of hours, players can still find entertaining ways to build the myths surrounding Alexios and Kassandra.



*** BEST ***
SHOOTER • COMPETITIVE MULTIPLAYER



Call Of Duty: Black Ops 4

October 12 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Call of Duty broke all the rules this year by ditching the campaign. Instead, Treyarch went all-in on the battle royale craze with Blackout – the best battle royale game out there. Whether you're hiding in a bathroom waiting for the circle to close or zipping around in a chopper, Blackout nails the survival dream. With continual updates to the last-person standing game mode, multiplayer, and zombies, Call of Duty delivers one of the best entries ever for those willing to go online.

The Missing: J.J. Macfield And The Island Of Memories

October 12 | PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC

Many video games involve death and rebirth, but The Missing makes them central gameplay mechanics. To progress in this atmospheric side-scroller, you must mutilate your character and regenerate in order to solve a variety of macabre and inventive puzzles. Director Hidetaka "Swery" Suehiro is known for offbeat titles like Deadly Premonition and D4, but with The Missing, he strikes a surprisingly emotional chord that will keep you thinking long after the credits roll.



6



Ubisoft
(Last Year: 2)

Assassin's Creed Odyssey is the best franchise entry in years, and Ubisoft also delivered Far Cry 5, The Crew 2, and Starlink. Rainbow Six Siege and For Honor also received strong support.

7



Capcom
(Last Year: 10)

Capcom's biggest win was Monster Hunter: World's coming out party in the West, but the resurgence of the Blue Bomber in Mega Man 11 was also a welcome sight.

8



Sega
(Last Year: 7)

The House of the Dead: Overkill had another strong year thanks to Yakuza 6, Yakuza Kiwami 2, Valkyria Chronicles 4, Football Manager 2019, and Total War Saga: Thrones of Britannia.

9



Electronic Arts
(Last Year: N/A)

This major publisher didn't have any elite titles, but Battlefield V, FIFA 19, NHL 19, Madden NFL 19, and UFC 3 were all decent.

10



Devolver Digital
(Last Year: N/A)

Devolver arguably had its strongest lineup yet in 2018 with standouts like Minit, Red Strings Club, The Messenger, Gris, Crossing Souls, and The Swords of Ditto.



Lego DC Super-Villains

October 16 | PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC

TT Games gives the bad guys their time in the spotlight in Lego DC Super-Villains, and it's not beaming down on them from a police helicopter. Character creation finally makes its way into the campaign, with your own custom minifig taking on a starring role in the proceedings, palling around with Joker and the rest of the crew. The story is uproarious fun, and quality-of-life tweaks like automated character swaps make it a great entry point for new players, too.



Starlink: Battle For Atlas

October 16 | PS4 • Xbox One • Switch

It would be easy to write off this toys-to-life sci-fi spectacle as being behind the times, but Ubisoft has crafted a compelling outer-space adventure that features dogfights around space stations, resource scavenging across alien planets, and a Saturday-morning-cartoon story that works as a family-friendly introduction to the genre. Play the Switch version of the game, and the integrated presence of Star Fox could almost make you believe you were playing a long-awaited sequel.



Soulcalibur VI

October 19 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

This franchise needed a comeback, and Soulcalibur VI is a strong return to form. Harkening back the series' roots, it captures the classic look and feel of the characters, but doesn't slack on making forward progress. The fighters all have new options and clever tricks at their disposal, and the subtle changes to the combat system on both offense and defense means there are few lopsided matchups. Fans also get some meaty (if uneven) single-player modes, cementing Soulcalibur's place as one of the most casual-friendly fighters around.

TOP 10 DEVELOPERS



Epic Games

Epic's masterful execution with Fortnite catapulted the game into mainstream consciousness with a steady stream of new unlockables and mysteries that kept players buzzing.



SIE Santa Monica

Sony's Santa Monica studio didn't just reinvent the critically acclaimed God of War series; it also displayed a rarely seen level of craftsmanship in our 2018 Game of the Year.



Rockstar Games

As great as many of the 2018 titles were, no other studio's ambition matched that of what Rockstar Games attempted with Red Dead Redemption II's open world.



Insomniac Games

After dabbling in open worlds with Sunset Overdrive, Insomniac Games saved its best moment for its biggest stage working alongside Marvel on Spider-Man.



Motion Twin

After years of toiling in relative obscurity, Motion Twin had its coming out party with the impressive rogue-lite action platformer Dead Cells.

*** BEST ***

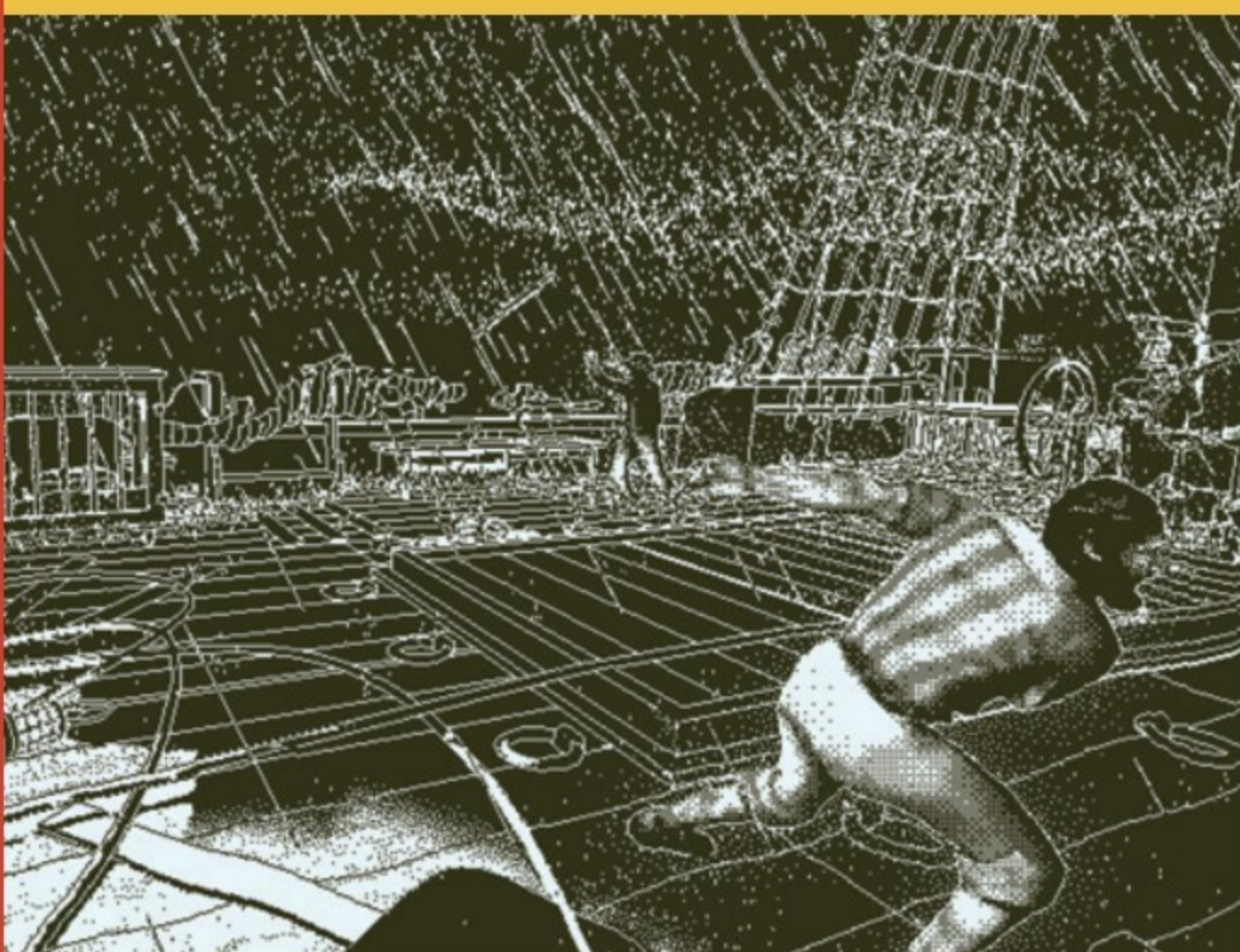
PUZZLE GAME • PC EXCLUSIVE



Return Of The Obra Dinn

October 18 | PC

Indie powerhouse developer Lucas Pope followed up Papers, Please with something completely different: a fantastical and challenging murder mystery that tasks you with solving the fates of 60 missing people on a merchant ship. As gruesomely enchanting as it is beguiling, Return Of The Obra Dinn is one of the best puzzle games in years and will dazzle you with its mysteries and startling presentation. Just be sure to play with pen and paper by your side.



Thronebreaker: The Witcher Tales

October 23 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

While its multiplayer cousin is focused on finding balance and depth in its cards, the single-player Thronebreaker: The Witcher Tales emphasizes creating powerful moments and decisions, both in its gameplay and story. The campaign not only provides the tough moral choices the main series is known for, but bleeds its tale onto its card battles. Even if you're not a big fan of Gwent, the story of betrayal and pride at the heart of Thronebreaker is worth seeing through.



6



Bandai Namco Studios

Bandai's internal team delivered the best Soulcalibur title in years, and also had the privilege of again working alongside Masahiro Sakurai on Super Smash Bros. Ultimate.

7



Ubisoft Quebec

Ubisoft Quebec successfully completed Assassin's Creed's transition to the role-playing genre by adding branching dialogue and great combat upgrades.

8



IO Interactive

The Danish studio staved off extinction after leaving Square Enix last year and celebrated its independence with the best Hitman in years.

9



Treyarch

No single-player campaign? No problem. Treyarch's PUBG clone Blackout is extremely well crafted and pairs well with Zombies mode and the traditional multiplayer.

10



CD Projekt Red

The Cyberpunk 2077 demo dominated E3, and the Polish devs also delivered two strong titles with Thronebreaker and the official release of Gwent.



Red Dead Redemption II

October 26 | PS4 • Xbox One

The photo finish runner-up in our Game of the Year competition, Red Dead Redemption II's impact will be felt for years to come. The open-world wunderkinds at Rockstar Games outdid themselves with a vibrant, reactive open world that still surprises 100 hours into the experience. Rockstar's storytelling chops were on full display as well. We came to love many of the Van der Linde outlaws over the course of the journey, which makes the gang's inevitable demise impactful, even though we all can see it coming.



Tetris Effect

November 9 | PSVR • PS4

Given the opportunity to make a new Tetris game, what do you do? If you're Tetsuya Mizuguchi, you do what you do best: Add music. The creator of Lumines and Rez (and the teams at Monstars and Resonair) layered a dynamic musical soundscape and trippy visuals over a rock-solid versions of the seminal puzzle game, creating one of the best version of Tetris we've played. PlayStation VR users can fully immerse themselves in the experience, but it's worth playing with or without a headset.

TOP 10 GAMES AS SERVICE



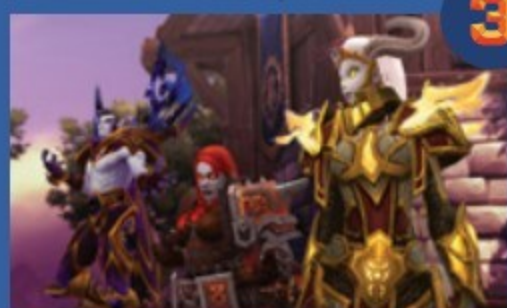
Fortnite

Epic hasn't slacked on keeping the phenomenon alive. Frequent updates, including a guest appearance by Thanos, a mysterious cube, and a crack in the sky, have kept fans happy and eager to see what's next.



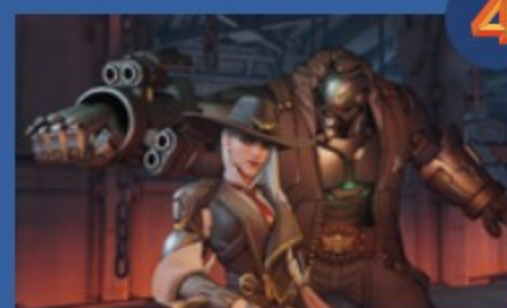
Path Of Exile

Grinding Gear Games not only launched Path of Exile's biggest expansion this year, but kept the most rewarding content free for all players, keeping avid fans coming back for more.



World Of Warcraft

Between the Battle for Azeroth expansion and the addition of the Classic server option, WoW has kept it decidedly old-school this year, but that's far from a bad thing.



Overwatch

Three new heroes, reworks for troublesome or flagging ones, and the multimillion-dollar Overwatch League have kept Blizzard's breakout game on everyone's minds all year.



Destiny 2

With Forsaken, Bungie delivered the experience Destiny players had hoped for at launch and then some, paving the way for more frequent and emergent content updates.



Hitman 2

November 13 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Despite a résumé spanning 18 years, Agent 47 remains at the top of his game. IO Interactive's decision to ditch an episodic format pays off, and allows players to discover elaborate and creative ways to off their targets at their own pace. Hitman 2 serves up the series' most unique and memorable locations to date, each offering countless hours of replayability to devoted fans. Folding Hitman's Sniper Challenge spin-off into the main game is also a great move for the future of the series.



Battlefield V

November 20 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Even with the firestorm of controversy surrounding Battlefield V before launch, there's still some fight left in this battle-hardened vet. Though light on content out the gate, what's there is classic Battlefield – great graphics, powerful sound effects, good controls, and competitive matches centered around squad play. Ultimately, the strength of this entry will depend on how well EA and DICE execute the live service content, but at least it's deploying from a dependable foundation.

* **BEST** *

VIRTUAL REALITY GAME • RHYTHM/MUSIC GAME



Beat Saber

November 20 | PSVR • Rift • Vive

Introduced as an early access title for Oculus Rift and Vive, Beat Saber immediately garnered attention. The rhythm game has you attacking blocks with light sabers in time with music and it's an undeniable blast. The PSVR version adds a campaign, new songs, and lots of song-modifying options, making it a full release that must be experienced in order to understand just how fun it is to use a light sword to play music. It makes you feel like a musical samurai conducting a beautiful, violent symphony.



Rainbow Six Siege

Eight new operators, four new maps, a new time-limited mode, and an active approach to both balance and player toxicity make Siege one of the most rock-solid shooters on the market.



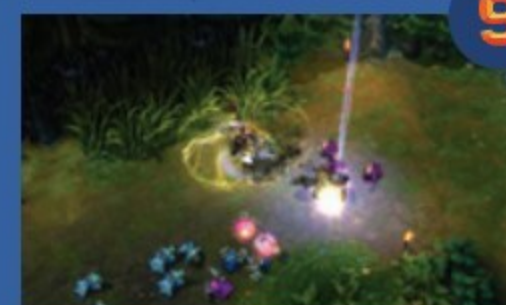
Pokémon Go

Niantic finally delivered on Go's promise in full this year, with the addition of trading and battling, as well as a slew of other progression goals that gave players more reasons to go outside.



Dota 2

Along with a new hero and dozens of reworks to the map, items, and heroes, Valve introduced a new subscription model that added some fun bonuses, but still keeps all the content free-to-play.



League Of Legends

Following up a major rune rework was a tall task, but Riot has kept apace of its regular update schedule, adding three new heroes, reworking five old ones, and sprinkling holiday events all year round.



Hearthstone

Along with three major expansions, which all added some interesting new deck strategies, Blizzard also implemented some key changes to both cards and matchmaking to keep the game fresh.

Darksiders III

November 27 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

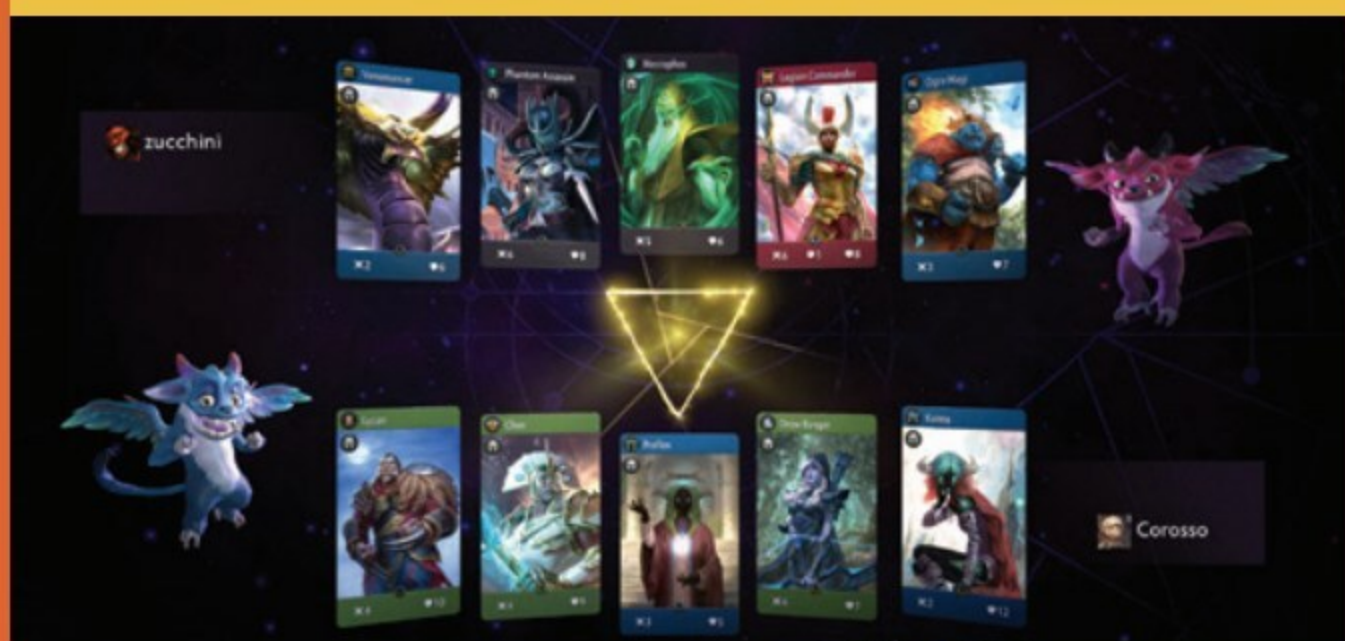
After the collapse of THQ, the fate of the Darksiders franchise was uncertain. Thankfully, Gunfire Games (a studio made up of folks who worked on the first two games) stepped up to continue the story. The resulting game is different than the first two, but succeeds by taking cues from games like Metroid and Dark Souls. Fury is a cool character, the bosses she fights are memorable, and the world is fun to explore. The game even plants seeds for a potential fourth Darksiders, which we hope gets to exist someday.



Artifact

November 28 | PC

Valve's first game in years isn't a new Half-Life or Portal, but a digital card game set in the Dota 2 universe. With three lanes and five heroes, the game puts the player in a much more methodical situation than a team-based MOBA, allowing for complex planning and strategy. While the monetization strategy and user interface need work, the gameplay is an interesting, different take in a crowded market where everyone is trying to be the next Magic: The Gathering.

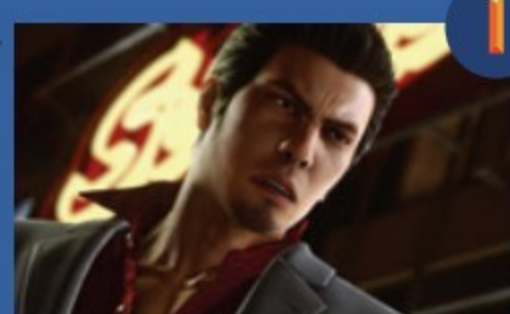


Just Cause 4

December 4 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Sure, Rico's mission to liberate yet another war-torn island (and avenge his father's death, no less) won't win any awards for its storytelling. Instead, Just Cause 4 focuses on delivering enough nonstop explosive action to make Jerry Bruckheimer blush. The fluid controls let you grapple and wingsuit your way through the series' biggest physics-based sandbox with ease, while the new tether options encourage you to blow up everything in sight in the most creative and hilarious ways possible.

TOP 10 REMASTERS/REMAKES



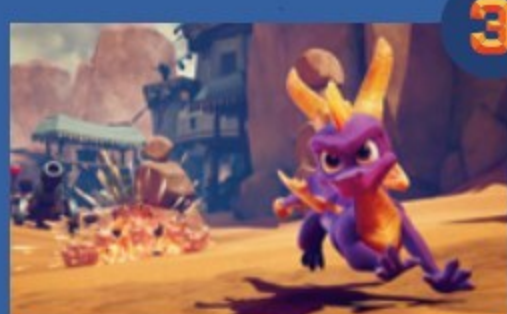
Yakuza Kiwami 2

This remake of the classic PS2 game showcases the numerous standout and oddball elements while stripping most of the flaws to create one of the best Yakuza games yet.



Shadow Of The Colossus

Remaking a masterpiece is a dangerous proposition, but developer Bluepoint Games was up to the task. This is the best way to experience the game, especially if you've never witnessed Wander's journey.



Spyro Reignited Trilogy

Following 2017's successful Crash remakes, Spyro was the next iconic character to get the same treatment. A new generation can now play the purple dragon's original adventures in this delightful remake.



Pokémon: Let's Go, Pikachu! And Let's Go, Eevee!

Pokémon's debut on Switch not only re-imagined 1999's Pokémon Yellow, but it also re-evaluated core mechanics like random battles and fighting wild Pokémon.



Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze

One of the best 2D platformers of the last decade couldn't attract an audience on Wii U, but it found new life and players on Switch. It also added Funky as a playable character, who is a blast to control.



Super Smash Bros. Ultimate

December 7 | Switch

One of Nintendo's biggest franchises finally hit the Switch, and it's worth the wait. Ultimate includes a massive roster of characters from all the past entries and virtually every stage since the days of the Nintendo 64 original. Best of all, it's a blast to play, whether you're battling friends in classic multiplayer or diving into the expansive solo World of Light experience. With a mix of old and new, it's one that's not to be missed.



Age Of Empires: Definitive Edition

The classic RTS got back in the spotlight thanks to this year's definitive edition. Microsoft Studios overhauled the graphics, made it 4K, remastered the soundtrack, and added gameplay tweaks.



Lumines Remastered

Any opportunity to revisit Lumines is exciting, and this year's remaster served as a fantastic reminder of why the game is so fun. It also improved the visuals and sound, added new modes, and made its way to Switch.



Dark Souls: Remastered

Dark Souls' influence on the industry is undeniable, and this first entry is where it really hit the mainstream. Blighttown looks the best it ever has and the remastered edition runs great, even on Switch.



Monster Hunter Generations Ultimate

This remake brought the beloved 3DS game to Switch and made big tweaks, such as improving the visuals, controls, and more. If you want to play Monster Hunter on the go, there is no better option.



Diablo III: Eternal Collection

Eternal Collection on Switch is just Diablo III on a new platform, but it's the perfect home for the loot collect-a-thon. It runs great, has fun Nintendo cosmetics, and lets you go straight to adventure mode.

Editor

TOP 10

Picks



Andy McNamara

- 1 God of War
- 2 World of Warcraft: Battle for Azeroth
- 3 Spider-Man
- 4 Red Dead Redemption II
- 5 Dead Cells
- 6 Picross S2
- 7 Hollow Knight
- 8 The Room: Old Sins
- 9 Yoku's Island Express
- 10 Clash Royale



Andrew Reiner

- 1 God of War
- 2 Red Dead Redemption II
- 3 Spider-Man
- 4 Super Smash Bros. Ultimate
- 5 Dead Cells
- 6 Call of Duty: Black Ops 4
- 7 Assassin's Creed Odyssey
- 8 Forza Horizon 4
- 9 Subnautica
- 10 Darksiders III



Matt Bertz

- 1 Red Dead Redemption II
- 2 God of War
- 3 NBA 2K19
- 4 Frostpunk
- 5 Assassin's Creed Odyssey
- 6 Return of the Obra Dinn
- 7 NHL 19
- 8 Subnautica
- 9 Thronebreaker: The Witcher Tales
- 10 Where the Water Tastes Like Wine



Joe Juba

- 1 God of War
- 2 Red Dead Redemption II
- 3 Valkyria Chronicles 4
- 4 Spider-Man
- 5 Return of the Obra Dinn
- 6 Assassin's Creed Odyssey
- 7 The Missing: J.J. Macfield and the Island of Memories
- 8 Ni No Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom
- 9 Shadow of the Colossus
- 10 The Awesome Adventures of Captain Spirit



Matt Miller

- 1 God of War
- 2 Destiny 2: Forsaken
- 3 Spider-Man
- 4 Assassin's Creed Odyssey
- 5 Into the Breach
- 6 Valkyria Chronicles 4
- 7 Gris
- 8 Forza Horizon 4
- 9 Far: Lone Sails
- 10 Red Dead Redemption II



Kimberley Wallace

- 1 Red Dead Redemption II
- 2 God of War
- 3 Spider-Man
- 4 Monster Hunter: World
- 5 Assassin's Creed Odyssey
- 6 Dragon Quest XI: Echoes of an Elusive Age
- 7 Super Smash Bros. Ultimate
- 8 Valkyria Chronicles 4
- 9 The Missing: J.J. Macfield and the Island of Memories
- 10 Where the Water Tastes Like Wine



Daniel Tack

- 1 Monster Hunter: World
- 2 Call of Duty: Black Ops 4
- 3 Dead Cells
- 4 Fortnite
- 5 God of War
- 6 Labyrinth of Refrain: Coven of Dusk
- 7 Subnautica
- 8 Deltarune
- 9 Artifact
- 10 Thronebreaker: The Witcher Tales



Matthew Kato

- 1 Red Dead Redemption II
- 2 Assassin's Creed Odyssey
- 3 God of War
- 4 F1 2018
- 5 NHL 2019
- 6 Laser League
- 7 Pro Evolution Soccer 2019
- 8 Return of the Obra Dinn
- 9 Football Manager 2019
- 10 Gris



**Jeff
Cork**

- 1** Red Dead Redemption II
- 2** God of War
- 3** Super Smash Bros. Ultimate
- 4** Yakuza 6: The Song of Life
- 5** Tetris Effect
- 6** Earth Defense Force 5
- 7** Monster Hunter: World
- 8** Assassin's Creed Odyssey
- 9** Lego DC Super-Villains
- 10** Overwatch



**Ben
Reeves**

- 1** Spider-Man
- 2** Frostpunk
- 3** Return of the Obra Dinn
- 4** God of War
- 5** Celeste
- 6** Dead Cells
- 7** Assassin's Creed Odyssey
- 8** Red Dead Redemption II
- 9** Mega Man 11
- 10** Jurassic World: Evolution



**Jeff
Marchiafava**

- 1** Red Dead Redemption II
- 2** Spider-Man
- 3** Assassin's Creed Odyssey
- 4** God of War
- 5** Into the Breach
- 6** Monster Hunter: World
- 7** Tetris Effect
- 8** Hitman 2
- 9** Just Cause 4
- 10** Unravel Two



**Kyle
Hilliard**

- 1** Red Dead Redemption II
- 2** God of War
- 3** Spider-Man
- 4** Iconoclasts
- 5** Super Smash Bros. Ultimate
- 6** Shadow of the Colossus
- 7** Beat Saber
- 8** Astro Bot Rescue Mission
- 9** Mega Man 11
- 10** Minit



**Ben
Hanson**

- 1** God of War
- 2** Red Dead Redemption II
- 3** Call of Duty: Black Ops 4
- 4** Super Smash Bros. Ultimate
- 5** Astro Bot Rescue Mission
- 6** Jurassic World Evolution
- 7** Subnautica
- 8** Dragon Quest XI: Echoes of an Elusive Age
- 9** Florence
- 10** Tetris Effect



**Brian
Shea**

- 1** Spider-Man
- 2** God of War
- 3** Red Dead Redemption II
- 4** Assassin's Creed Odyssey
- 5** Super Smash Bros. Ultimate
- 6** UFC 3
- 7** Pokémon: Let's Go, Eevee!
- 8** Marvel Strike Force
- 9** Tetris Effect
- 10** Shadow of the Colossus



**Javy
Gwaltney**

- 1** Red Dead Redemption II
- 2** God of War
- 3** Return of the Obra Dinn
- 4** Monster Hunter: World
- 5** Spider-Man
- 6** Call of Duty: Black Ops 4
- 7** Hitman 2
- 8** Diablo III Eternal Collection
- 9** Overwatch
- 10** Yakuza Kiwami 2



**Elise
Favis**

- 1** Red Dead Redemption II
- 2** Spider-Man
- 3** God of War
- 4** Assassin's Creed Odyssey
- 5** Where the Water Tastes Like Wine
- 6** Red Strings Club
- 7** Hitman 2
- 8** Subnautica
- 9** Minit
- 10** Overcooked 2



**Suriel
Vazquez**

- 1** God of War
- 2** Dragon Ball FighterZ
- 3** Destiny 2: Forsaken
- 4** Red Dead Redemption II
- 5** Soulcalibur VI
- 6** Celeste
- 7** Yakuza 6: The Song of Life
- 8** Deltarune
- 9** Thronebreaker: The Witcher Tales
- 10** Artifact



**Imran
Khan**

- 1** Monster Hunter: World
- 2** Celeste
- 3** Spider-Man
- 4** Hollow Knight
- 5** Super Smash Bros. Ultimate
- 6** Tetris Effect
- 7** Dragon Ball FighterZ
- 8** Gris
- 9** Yakuza 6: The Song of Life
- 10** Astro Bot Rescue Mission



**Leo
Vader**

- 1** Red Dead Redemption II
- 2** Hitman 2
- 3** Assassin's Creed Odyssey
- 4** Into the Breach
- 5** Yakuza 6: The Song of Life
- 6** Shadow of the Tomb Raider
- 7** Maple Story 2
- 8** Return of the Obra Dinn
- 9** Just Cause 4
- 10** Frostpunk

EDITOR AND READER

Games Of The Year 2018

GAME
OF THE YEAR

BEST ACTION GAME • BEST SONY EXCLUSIVE



E EDITOR CHOICE

R READER CHOICE

God of War

*** BEST ***

ROLE-PLAYING GAME

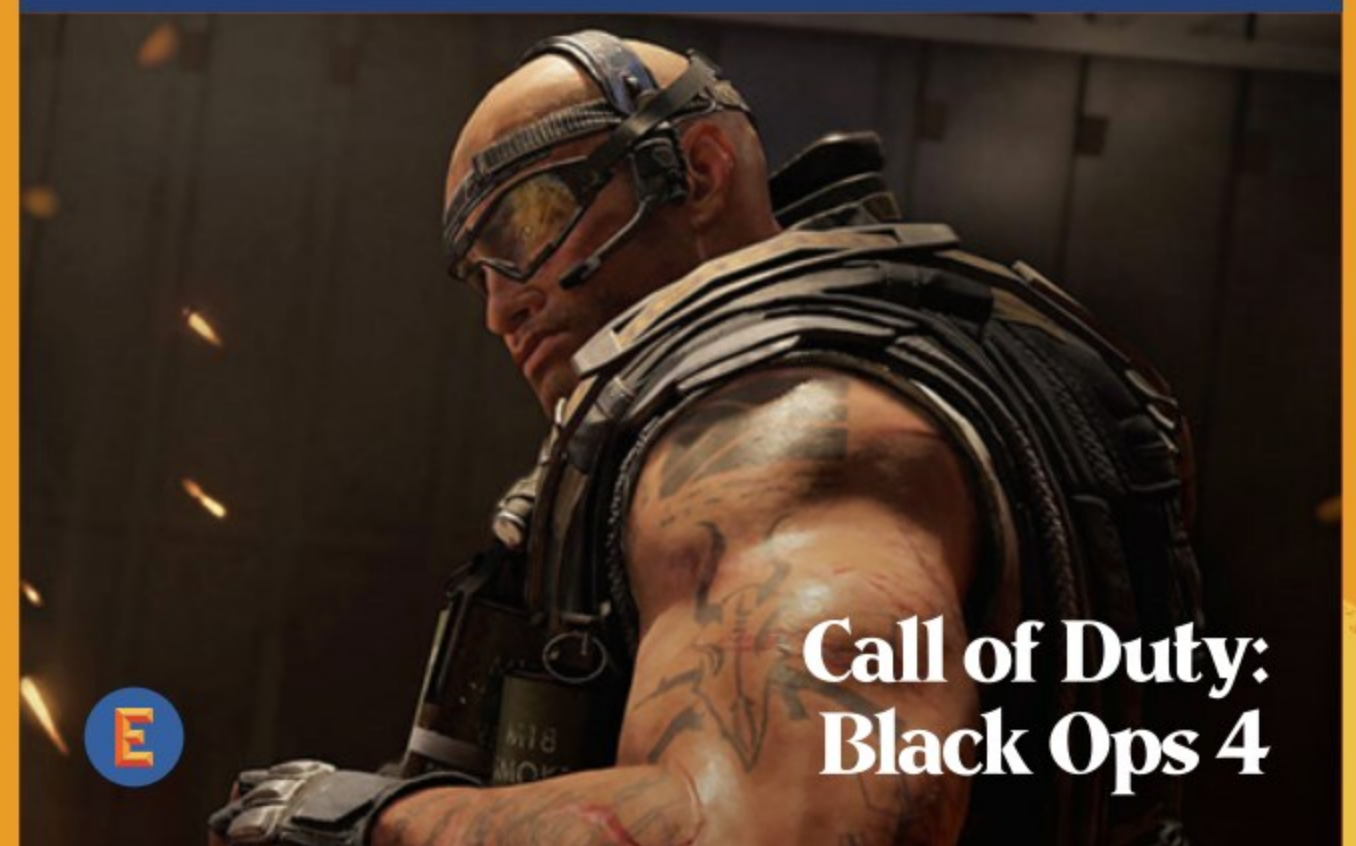


E
R

**Assassin's
Creed Odyssey**

*** BEST ***

COMPETITIVE MULTIPLAYER

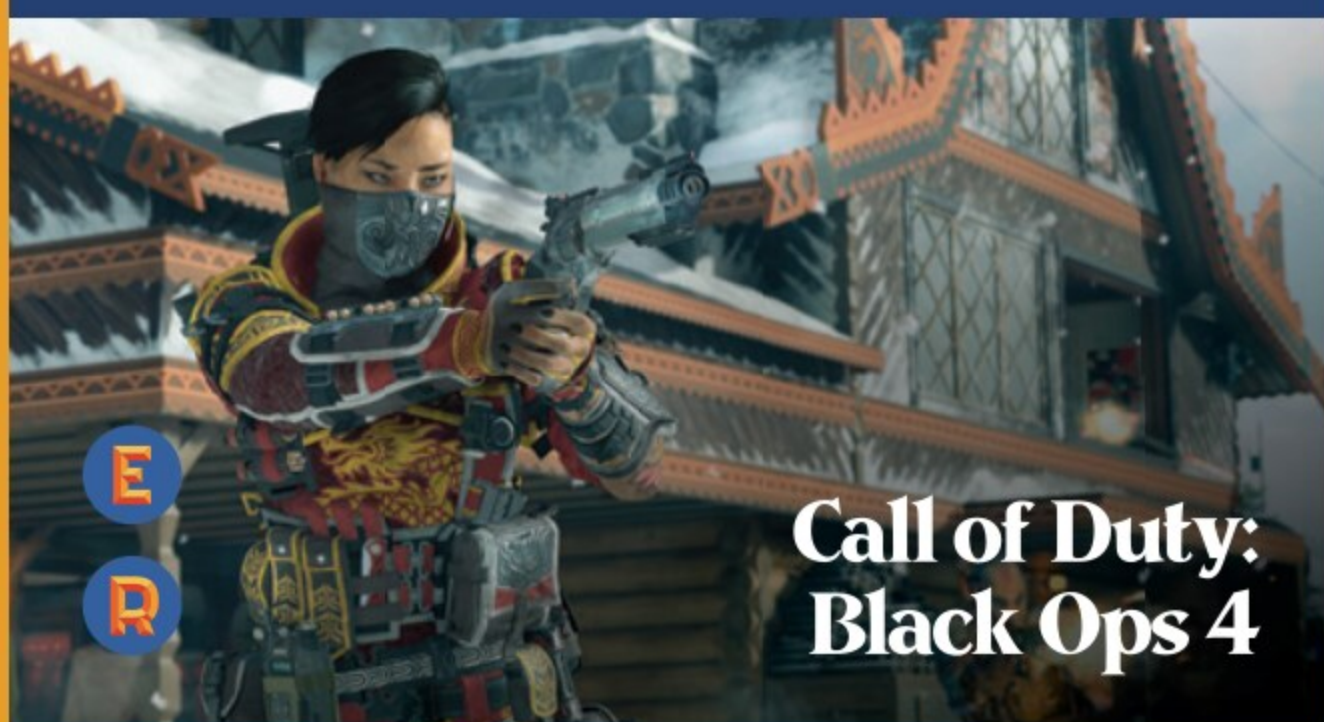


E

**Call of Duty:
Black Ops 4**

*** BEST ***

SHOOTER



E
R

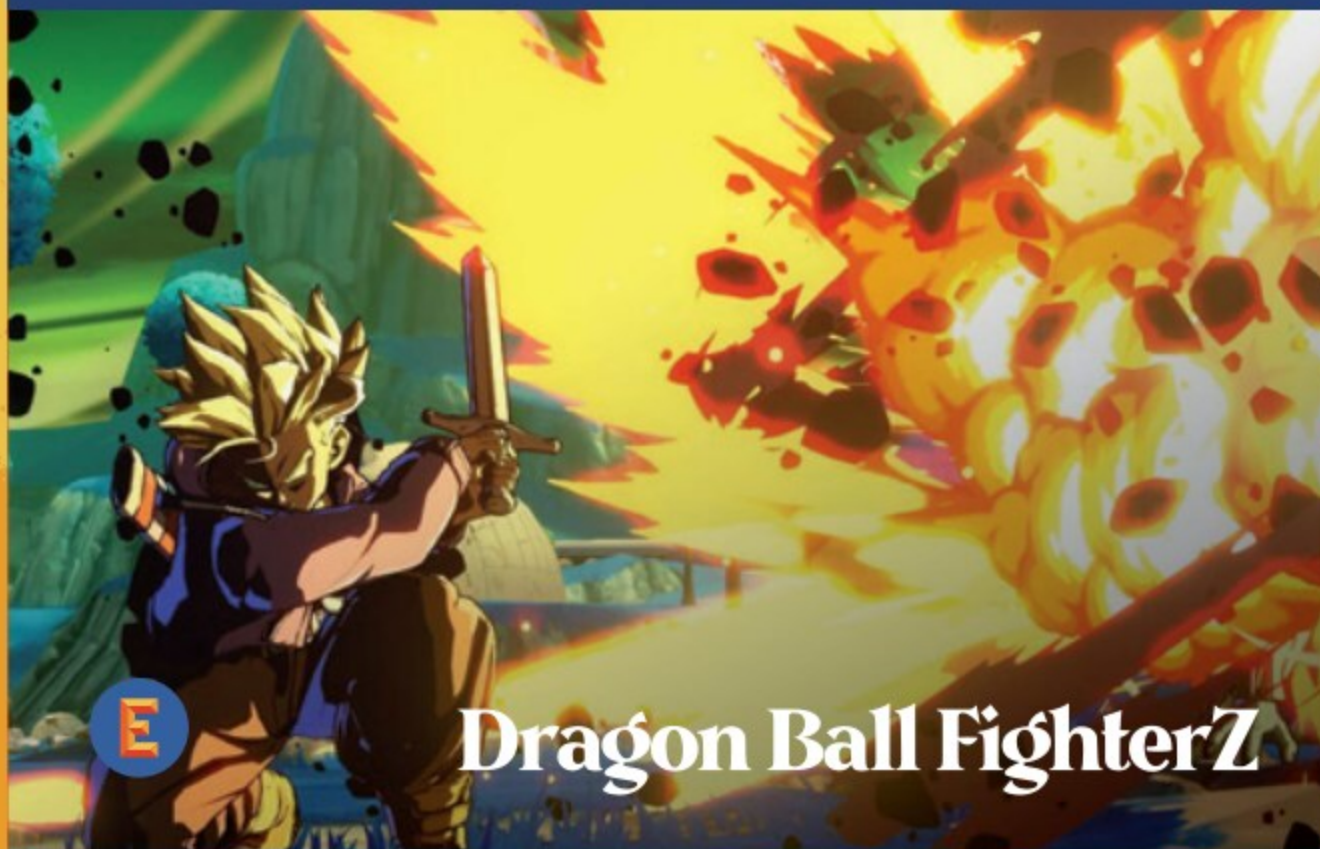
**Call of Duty:
Black Ops 4**

R



**Super Smash
Bros. Ultimate**

*** BEST ***
FIGHTING GAME



Dragon Ball FighterZ



Super Smash Bros. Ultimate

*** BEST ***
SIMULATION GAME



Frostpunk



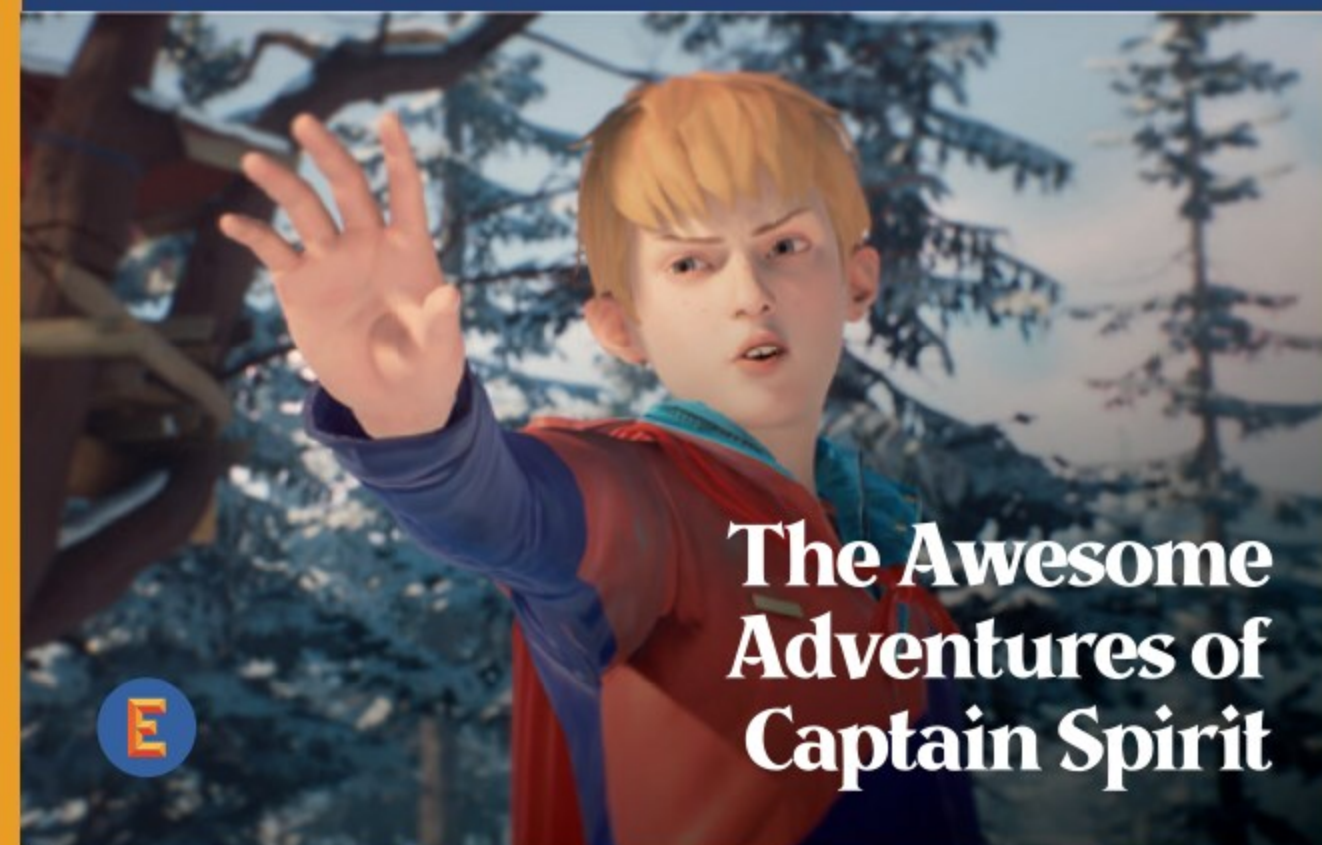
Civilization VI: Rise and Fall

*** BEST ***
GAMES-AS-SERVICE



Fortnite

*** BEST ***
ADVENTURE GAME



The Awesome Adventures of Captain Spirit



Detroit: Become Human

*** BEST ***
PLATFORMING GAME



Celeste

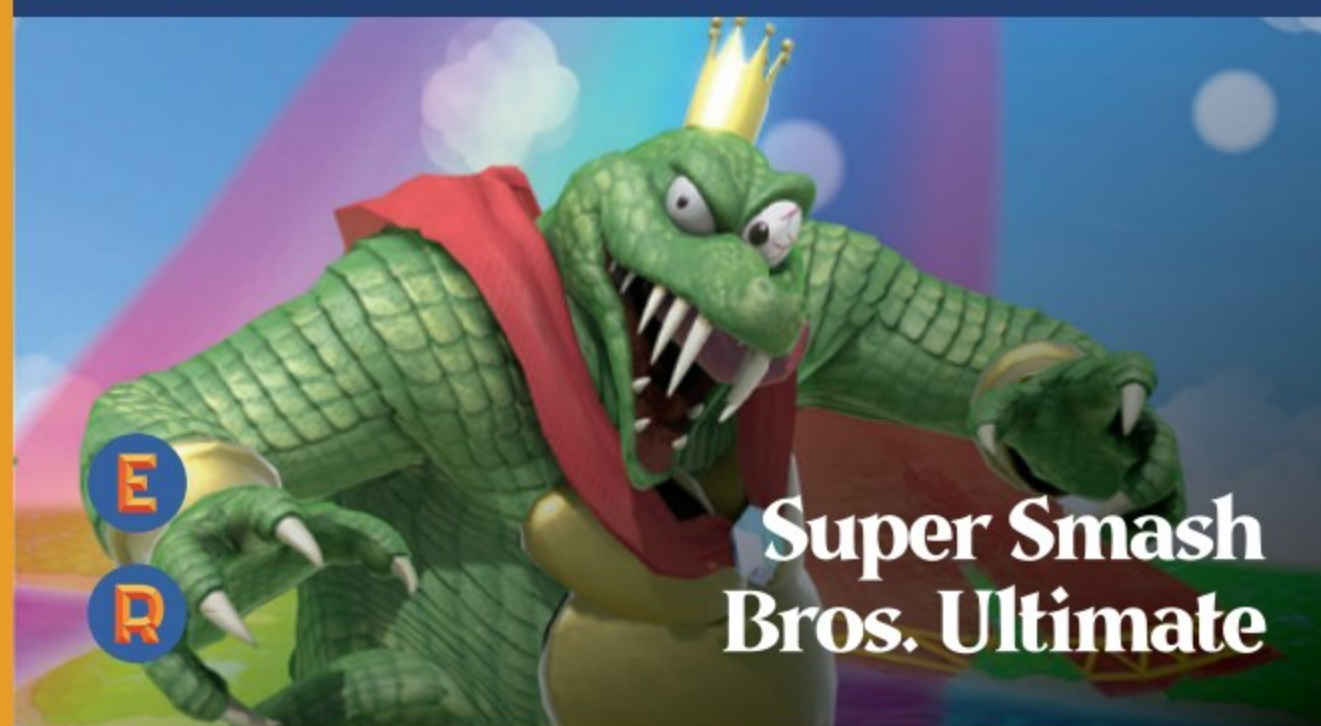
*** BEST ***
COOPERATIVE GAME



*** BEST ***
VIRTUAL REALITY GAME • RHYTHM/MUSIC GAME



*** BEST ***
NINTENDO EXCLUSIVE



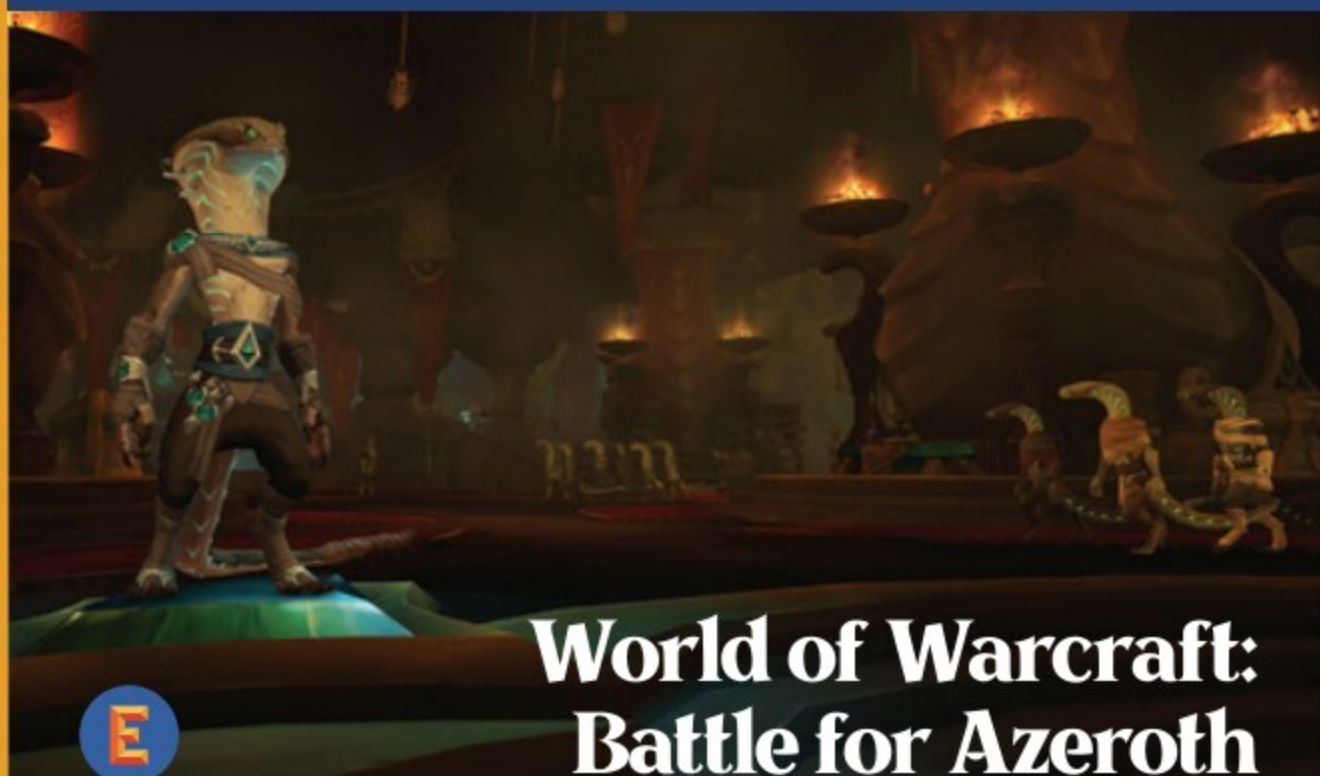
*** BEST ***
PC EXCLUSIVE



*** BEST ***
SPORTS GAME



*** BEST ***
MMO



E

**World of Warcraft:
Battle for Azeroth**



R

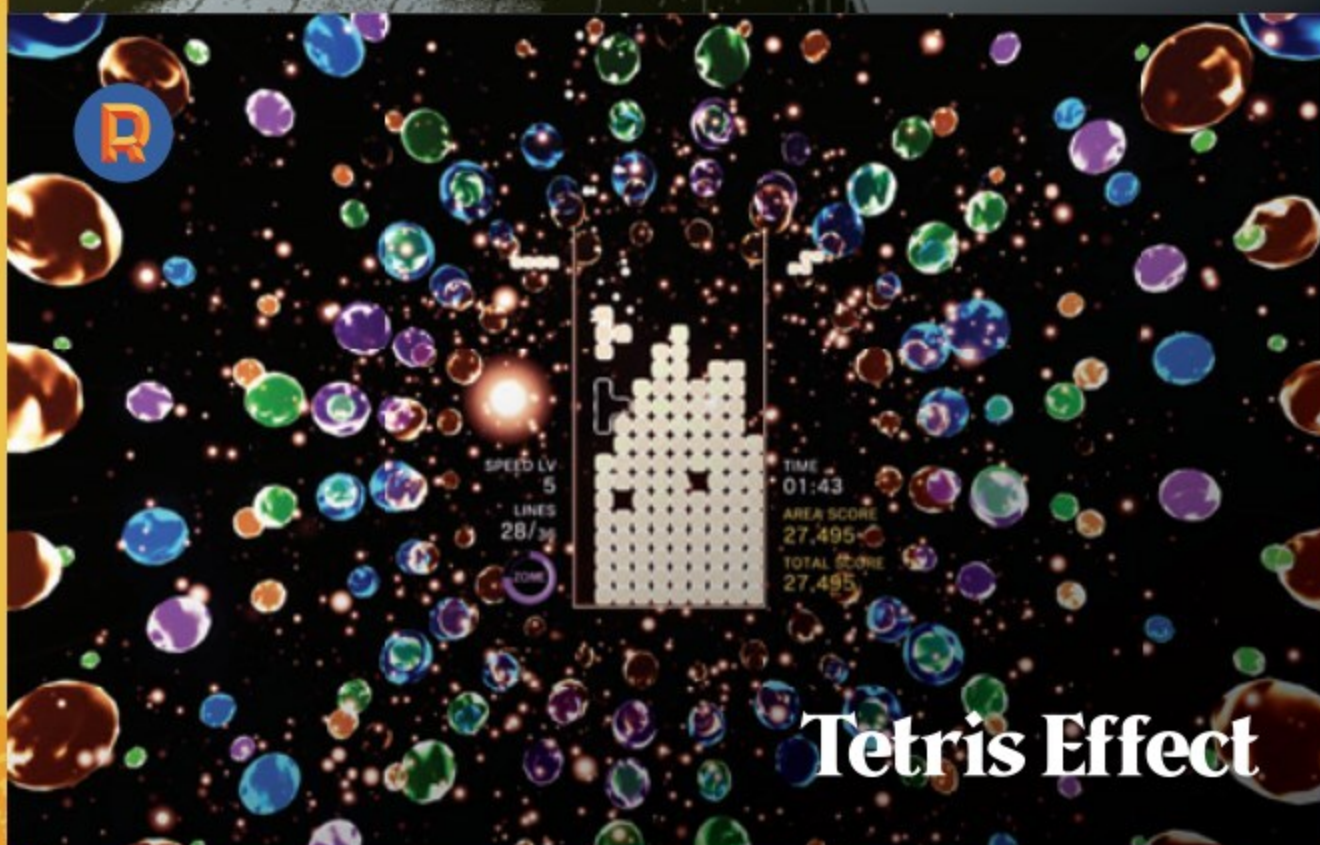
**The Elder Scrolls
Online: Summerset**

*** BEST ***
PUZZLE GAME



E

Return of the Obra Dinn



R

Tetris Effect

*** BEST ***
REMASTERED/REMADE GAME



E

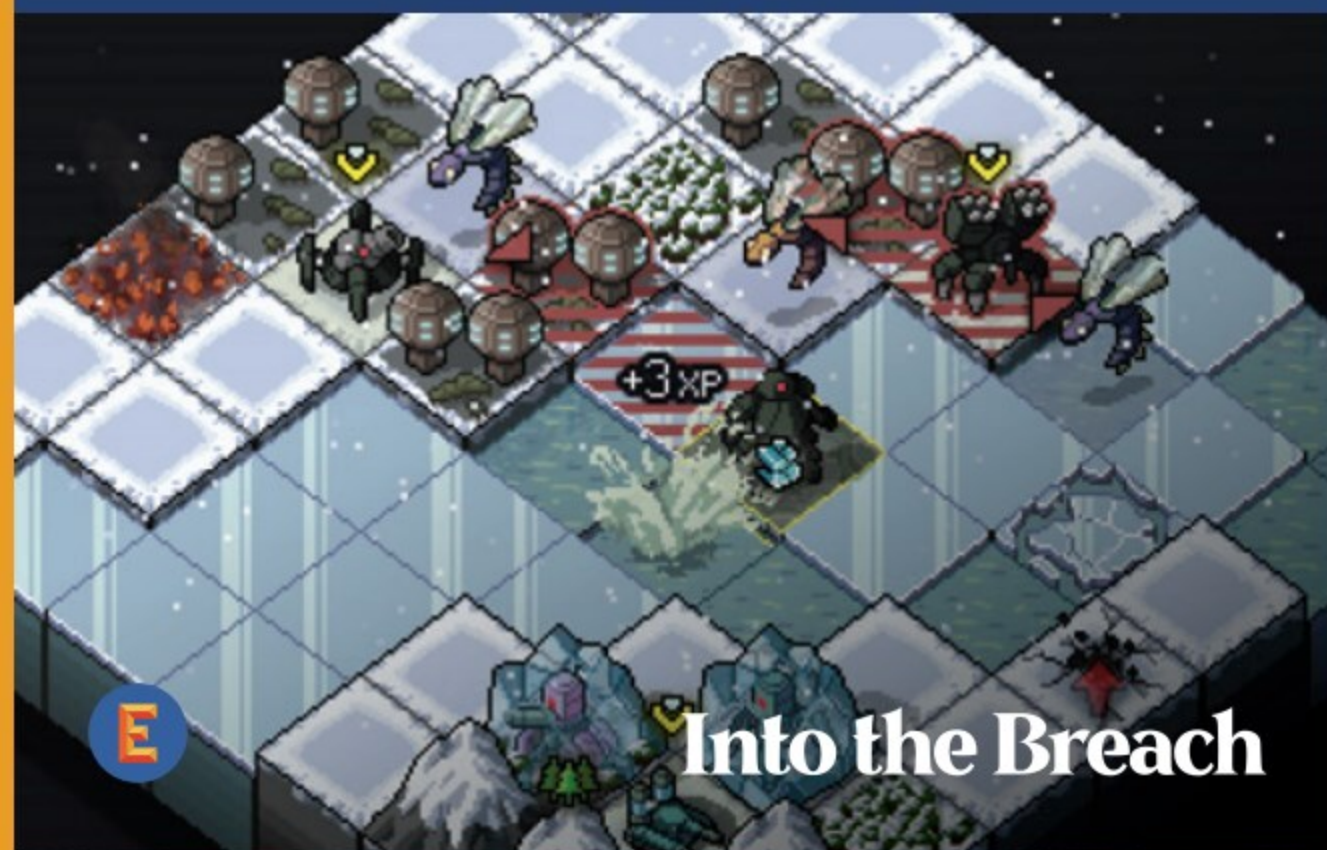
**Yakuza
Kiwami 2**



R

**Shadow
of the
Colossus**

*** BEST ***
STRATEGY GAME



E

Into the Breach



R

Valkyria Chronicles 4

*** BEST ***
RACING GAME • MICROSOFT EXCLUSIVE



E

R

Forza Horizon 4

The Outer Worlds

Playing dumb in outer space

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Private Division

» **Developer**
Obsidian Entertainment

» **Release**
2019

In the mid-'90s, Tim Cain and Leonard Boyarsky teamed up to create the original Fallout series for Interplay Productions. Fallout's retro-futurism and dark humor were a breath of fresh air, and its original ideas have survived the test of time. Cain and Boyarsky eventually parted ways to work on games like Vampire: The Masquerade, WildStar, and Diablo III: Reaper of Souls, but now the duo has reunited at Obsidian as co-directors on a brand-new sci-fi RPG that aims to take the best elements of Mass Effect and Fallout and blend them into a goofy new adventure.

Players begin their adventure as a colonist who has just awoken from a long interstellar hibernation. Their destination: the Halcyon solar system and Earth's most distant colony. The Halcyon system was highlighted for settlement because it featured two Earth-class planets. However, once players arrive in the system, they discover corporations have taken over the

settlement process and have branded every object in sight.

"This is an alternate history game," Boyarsky says. "We took a lot of inspiration from the robber barons of the late 1800s and how they controlled every aspect of people's existence, so this is kind of like robber baron in space. The corporations have taken over everything. They have carte blanche to do whatever they want. They basically run people's lives."

To fight back against these space barons, players assemble a motley crew of rebels and scour the system getting to the bottom of a corporate conspiracy. Halcyon is a big system, so players touch down on a wide variety of locations, including wealthy cities full of gleaming skyscrapers, abandoned moons, and high-tech space stations.

Obsidian isn't taking this sci-fi adventure too seriously, though. This zany world is filled with fat snakes bred to create more leather, missions

centering on diet toothpaste, and rare weapons like shrink rays that can miniaturize biological opponents. During one mission, we encounter a lab featuring a large sign labeled "Secret Base." Additionally, Obsidian is letting players bumble through the game as a dumb person – literally, there is a dialogue option labeled [Dumb] that often offers clueless musings.

"I think humor is really, really hard to do in a game, but games that go pure dark are hard to take in every night," Cain says. "I play games that skew dark, and after a while I just don't want to play them anymore. We like this kind of dark humor where we can put something in the game that also looks silly, but when you dig into it, you find out it's really horrific."

Like many good RPGs, The Outer World's missions can be tackled in a variety of ways. Dialogue and stealth options allow players to bypass fire-fights, but those who like to mix things up can approach encounters with



either melee or ranged weapons. Guns offer the relative safety of distance, while melee weapons dish out a lot of damage and can hit multiple enemies in a single swing. Obsidian says those who like action but don't want to get their hands dirty can spec their character to be a leader who sends their crew off to deal with every problem.

"We always ask ourselves, 'How are people going to react in the game and what do we think they're going to want to do?'" Cain says. "We're happy to say that you can kill everybody in the game and still finish the main story arc. You'd be a psychopath, but you could do it."

We enjoyed our brief taste of Obsidian's unique spin on sci-fi and the studio's bizarre humor, and we can't wait to get our hands on the game in 2019. Given the mixed reception from Fallout and Mass Effect's recent offerings, The Outer Worlds could be just the thing that western RPGs fans are yearning for. » **Ben Reeves**



Far Cry New Dawn

Ubisoft drops the bombs



» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action
(2-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft Montreal

» **Release**
February 15

After launching Far Cry 5 in 2018, Ubisoft Montreal is bringing players back to that game's setting: Hope County. However, this direct sequel to Far Cry 5 is far from a retread. The Hope County you explore in Far Cry New Dawn is drastically different, as a global nuclear apocalypse all but destroyed human civilization across much of the planet. You step into the shoes of a new character hoping to help the residents of Hope County in a unique twist on the franchise.

Rather than going for the stereotypical gray and brown aesthetic many people associate with the post-apocalyptic concept, Ubisoft Montreal researched how the planet would react to and recover from an actual nuclear war. After the first six years, the sun and rain return, causing a "super bloom" event that leads to vegetation reclaiming the planet at the start of year 10. Far Cry New Dawn takes place during the super bloom, 17 years after the nuclear war of 2018.

Another theme Ubisoft Montreal is pursuing is the idea that nothing is being manufactured anymore, so everything from buildings to weapons

have a makeshift feel. This is most evident in the series' zaniest weapon yet: the Saw Launcher. This device uses circular saws for ammunition, launching them at your targets. It starts out shooting one saw at a time, but you can upgrade to shoot multiple at once; the highest I saw was three saws, which all ricochet off objects and into enemies in a satisfying manner.

Far Cry New Dawn centers on this conflict between the survivors, who are building a community for the future, and the Highwaymen, who don't think the world is salvageable and move from city to city, consuming all the resources and living for today. As you might imagine, your character aligns themselves with the survivors at their home base of Prosperity. The survivors decide in order to rebuild civilization, they need to run the Highwaymen out of town.

Since the nuclear event wasn't localized to Montana, the bombs affected other parts of the world. If you're in need of resources, you can embark on expeditions, which take place in other areas of the country. During a live gameplay demo, I saw one expedition take place in a Louisiana swamp. An

abandoned theme park serves as the setting as I watch the character infiltrate a camp and recover resources. Over the course of the game, players can also travel to another location on the west coast of the U.S., as well as an Arizona location.

While you're in Hope County, many of the standard Far Cry activities are at your disposal. You can embark on new treasure hunts, which often involve a twist; the treasure hunt I saw has you infiltrate a wolverine nest to retrieve a key, but wolverines are the least of your worries once the barn you're inside goes up in flames.

While outposts are nothing new to the Far Cry series, New Dawn adds a new gameplay loop to them. Once you take down an outpost, it becomes a fast-travel location for you. However, you can choose to send those in that outpost to scavenge for additional materials, essentially abandoning it and allowing the Highwaymen to retake it in exchange for resources. Once they reclaim the outpost, you can take it back, but it will be more difficult the second time around.

If you need some help, you can play cooperatively or bring a Gun for Hire or



Though Mother Nature has begun reclaiming the planet, the effects of the nuclear event can still be seen in mutated wildlife



The survivors' home base is called Prosperity. While there, you can upgrade weapons and train your Guns for Hire companions

animal companion into a fight. These characters unlock as you play through the story and can learn additional abilities as you use them more. For example, one of the Guns for Hire is a grizzled, elderly woman named Nana, who happens to be the sharpest shot in Hope County. This sniper is an ideal companion for stealth missions, as she can unlock abilities like using a silencer or being able to shoot through cover. The other Gun for Hire I saw was Carmina, who is the daughter of Nick and Kim from Far Cry 5.

While I didn't get to see the other Guns for Hire, creative director JS Decant says they will be familiar archetypes and even some familiar characters among the lineup. "There is an RPG, there is a bow-and-arrow char-

acter, and a shotgun," Decant says.

Two new animal companions are also unlockable. Though Boomer the dog from Far Cry 5 is long gone, Timber fills his role as the new canine companion. Timber not only has some new takedowns, but can also ride in vehicles and scare away larger animals. I also saw Horatio, a giant boar. This monstrous beast can be a tank to take down and draws the attention of the enemies in the area.

Though Far Cry New Dawn is meant to be a standalone title, players who worked through the campaign of Far Cry 5 will notice definite continuations from that story. Many of the cult's structures have been repurposed in this post-apocalyptic world, and we even got a glimpse of cult leader

Joseph Seed, the primary antagonist of Far Cry 5, at the end of the reveal trailer. "The world is in the place where [Joseph] wanted it to be," Decant says. "He wanted the world to be there so he can start something fresh, something new, something far from what we did with our societies. [...] It was a tricky thing because on one hand we wanted to continue with these characters that we loved in Far Cry 5, but at the same time, we wanted to make sure this was a post-apocalyptic game that could be accessible for anyone."

Far Cry New Dawn looks to be a fun spin-off entry with an interesting take on the post apocalypse. With launch just around the corner, we don't have to wait long to find out if Hope County is truly worth saving. » **Brian Shea**

At the end of the day, Far Cry excels when it lets you do over-the-top stunts like what you'd see in an action movie. New Dawn promises plenty of that





Devil May Cry 5

The devils you know

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Capcom

» **Release**
March 8

The 2013 reboot of Devil May Cry allowed the series to start over with a clean slate, shedding the burden of established characters and plotlines. With the upcoming Devil May Cry 5, Capcom appears to have the opposite goal: Include as many familiar faces as possible. Fans can look forward to a story that continues the exploits of Dante, Nero, Lady, and Trish – but that doesn't mean DMC 5 is rooted solely in the past.

The biggest addition is V, a new character who joins Nero and Dante on the playable roster. Unlike the guns-and-swords approach of his compatriots, V's combat style revolves

around summoning demons to deal damage. Each of the three demons is specialized for specific situations (like close-range attacks or aerial combat), and they take the shape of a panther, bird, or hulking titan. These creatures do most of the dirty work, but V himself can attack with his cane to finish off foes. The exact relationship between the three playable characters is still mysterious, but like Nero and Dante, V's hair turns white when using certain abilities, so he may simply be part of the family.

Another new feature is the cameo system, which allows the characters to cross paths in certain missions

when being controlled by other players. Even though DMC 5 is largely focused on single-player action, the cameo allows online players to fight demons together in real-time encounters, or by using recorded ghost data. This means sometimes you may see another player make a guest appearance in the background of your game, and other times you may be teaming up for simultaneous cooperative combat. However, Capcom says this is all folded seamlessly into the single-player story, so you don't need to worry about it happening at times when it wouldn't make sense for characters to partner up.

While all of that will be in the game when it launches in March, Capcom also revealed players will get a free update in April that adds the Bloody Palace mode. Though exact details were not disclosed, Bloody Palace has traditionally been a great way for players test their skills. The incarnations of this mode in previous installments involve the heroes advancing through a series of floors by completing increasingly difficult encounters – often with tantalizing rewards waiting at the end.

Devil May Cry 5 has a mix of classic elements and familiar faces, but it is also pushing the series in different directions. What we've seen (and played) so far has us optimistic that the team at Capcom can find the right balance between old and new and create another thrilling journey to the underworld. » **Joe Juba**



Mortal Kombat 11

Same killers, new twists

Although it was all but a given, NetherRealm Studios held off on announcing Mortal Kombat 11 long enough to raise some doubt about whether that was what the developer was working on. But as studio creative director Ed Boon took the stage at this year's Game Awards show to announce the winner of the "best sports or racing game" category, viewers were surprised by a trailer that shattered those doubts with an iconic, bloody spear.

The first trailer for Mortal Kombat 11 showed off a familiar sight, with Raiden and Scorpion facing off at night in the courtyard of a temple. But, just a few seconds in, it's clear NetherRealm isn't backing down from the series' hyper-violent streak: a naginata pierces Scorpion's torso, short swords punch through Raiden's skull, fingers get broken – you get the idea.

Raiden, who looks to have retained his corruption and red lightning from the end of Mortal Kombat X, manages to win the fight and seems to kill his opponent only to be faced, seconds later, with a second Scorpion, this one sporting a more "classic" outfit. The new Scorpion self-immolates and jumps at Raiden, eviscerating his torso completely save for his spine. Finally, a quick teaser appears to explain what's going on, as a mysterious woman is seen touching a giant hourglass flowing in reverse. This likely means the multiple Scorpions has to do with some sort of time-traveling plotline.

While the trailer didn't show any gameplay, it might offer some hints about what changes NetherRealm has in store this time around. NetherRealm senior UI artist Daanish Syed has stated on Twitter that "nearly every move you see in the trailer is a real



move from the game." If that's the case, there are lots of interesting cues to pick up on; Scorpion's been more keen on using swords with each new entry, and he seems to be leaning on them here more than ever. Additionally, Raiden happened to find that naginata on the ground, used it once, then dropped it. This could hint at stages with usable weapons, similar to Injustice's environmental attacks.

Although the trailer was short on explicit info, Warner Bros. has released some details about what to expect. For one, Shao Kahn is confirmed to be a returning fighter as a pre-order incentive. Second, along with the return of the series' trademark cinematic story mode, the paradoxical trailer is a nod to a new feature called "custom character variations," which

let you customize your fighters. While the aesthetic differences between the first and second Scorpions are obvious, how much those differences will impact gameplay remains a mystery. Will this new system build on Mortal Kombat X's variations, which gave each character three styles (each with their own special moves) to choose from? Or will it implement something like Injustice 2's gear system, which let you use different special moves depending on what armor you had equipped?

The answer is still up in the air, but not for long. NetherRealm has announced it is planning a full reveal of the game in January as part of a community event, where we'll see the game in action for the first time.

» **Suriel Vazquez**

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Fighting
(Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
Warner Bros. Interactive
Entertainment

» **Developer**
NetherRealm Studios

» **Release**
April 23



Marvel Ultimate Alliance 3: The Black Order

A surprise revival

» **Platform**
Switch

» **Style**
1-4 Player Action/
Role-Playing
(4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Team Ninja

» **Release**
2019

In 2004, Raven Software developed *X-Men Legends*, a four-player Diablo-style action/RPG starring Marvel's oppressed mutants. *Legends* was a hit among both gamers and comic fans, spawning several follow-ups. Many believe the franchise peaked with *Marvel Ultimate Alliance* – an epic hack-n-slash starring Marvel's heavy hitters. Sadly, after the launch of *Marvel Ultimate Alliance 2* in 2009, the series went dormant. Thankfully, Marvel, Nintendo, and Team Ninja have teamed up to revive it. This entry features some modern faces and a deadly new foe.

The Black Order is a relatively new creation. This group of ruthless aliens debuted in *Marvel Comics* back in 2013, but they were an instant hit and recently appeared in the blockbuster *Avengers: Infinity War*. These sinister warmasters remain doggedly devoted to Thanos and his mission to raze worlds across the cosmos.

For *Marvel Ultimate Alliance 3*, The Black Order journeyed to Earth in search of the infinity stones, and only Marvel's mightiest heroes stand in their way. While this premise sounds uncannily familiar to The Black Order's introduction in the comics, Marvel is developing a brand-new storyline that will include heroes like Captain

America, Iron Man, Spider-Man, The Hulk, and several other members from teams like the X-Men and the Guardians of the Galaxy.

Team Ninja is the first Japanese studio to tackle the series, but it hopes to deliver an action/RPG experience that is in line with fans' expectations. A big change to the action is a brand new over-the-shoulder camera that zooms in on the characters. Fortunately, traditionalists will be able to switch over to a classic top-down perspective.

It wouldn't feel like *Ultimate Alliance*

if you couldn't play together with friends. Up to four players can drop in and drop out of online co-op or offline local wireless. But you don't even need multiple system to assemble the Avengers, since up to four-players can fight together on a single Switch.

The original *Marvel Alliance* games were a bit goofy, but that was part of their charm. Hopefully this seemingly darker tone and new perspective won't turn off fans, because like a beloved comic-book character, it's wonderful to see *Marvel Ultimate Alliance* rise from the ashes. » **Ben Reeves**



The first thing Thanos cut in half was his set of gauntlets



We haven't seen an *Ultimate Alliance* game in 10 years, but Team Ninja is developing this one exclusively for the Switch



Hades

Roguelite meets narrative

Many game studios make a name for themselves around a genre specialty, but Supergiant Games has opted for a different approach. Each of its games (*Bastion*, *Transistor*, *Pyre*) is unmistakable thanks to a vibrant color palette, lush art direction, and focus on storytelling, even as the genre influences are each different from the last. With the newly announced *Hades*, the developer is trying their hand at roguelite gameplay, but with the narrative richness the team is known for. While the game is still coming together, my early impressions are positive. *Hades* has something that many roguelikes lack – a genuine sense of investment in characters and their relationships.

You are Zagreus, the son of Hades, and it's time you move out. Your dad's a jerk, and his house just isn't big enough for the both of you. If only setting off into the world beyond wasn't so hard, you'd stop ending up back in your old bedroom every night, getting mocked by your old man for your inability to make it. You just keep getting murdered on your way out the door.

In one playthrough after the next, my time with *Hades* is occupied with repeated attempts to escape hell. The spirits and demons that block my way appear in a randomized sequence of rooms, and helpful gods like Artemis occasionally send along messages and power-ups to help me succeed, usually to upgrade my attacks. The dungeon crawl gameplay is tight and challenging, focused on mastering a variety of unlockable weapons, and navigating increasingly crowded rooms of varied foes and their unrelenting attacks. Balancing my use of melee, ranged, and dash attacks is key to success, but there's little room for error; Zagreus' small health pool depletes quickly, sending me back to the begin-

ning to try again. As is traditional in rogue-lite mechanics, most of my discrete upgrades disappear on death, but if I'm lucky, I bring home some new keys and other currency to unlock additional weapons, build character relationships with gifts, and improve my core abilities.

In one run, I encounter Sisyphus taking a break from his endless rock pushing, and he offers to lend a hand to my escape attempt. In another, the enigmatic ferryman Charon keeps shop, willing to sell me health upgrades. But most of the rooms are large arenas, replete with obstacles, exploding traps, and branching doorways that are clearly marked with the reward I can hope for beyond each gate. Do I go for a room with a guaranteed new power, or head for the room with that last item I need to unlock the spear? Any given fight could easily be my last.

In between runs, it's the narrative loop that sets the game apart. After every death, the characters back in *Hades*' palace have new things to say, and you slowly progress Zagreus' relationship with each. Hades plays out as a typical family drama, but with the atypical family of the Greek gods as a backdrop. Poseidon is your fun uncle, while your dad simply won't talk with his older brother Zeus. Is Nyx, the personification of night, really your mom? Achilles works in your dad's house and helped train you, and he's secretly cheering for you to get out. If only you could bring your beloved dog, Cerberus. Strong writing and excellent voice work bring these characters to life, and the sting of yet another defeat is often lessened because I know I can hear the next story snippet. Alternately, for players who want a more traditional hack-and-slash action game, most of the story can be breezed past.

While the game is still being built,

I was impressed by the breadth of progression and exploration available in this publicly available early access build, which is currently exclusive to the new Epic Games Store. The injection of story elements does wonders to enhance an already strong action loop. *Hades* isn't complete yet, as the developer continues to flesh out new enemies, upgrades, and levels. But even at this early stage, my biggest disappointment was the wait to see all those additions; this journey through hell is off to a great start. » **Matt Miller**

» **Platform**
PC • Consoles TBA

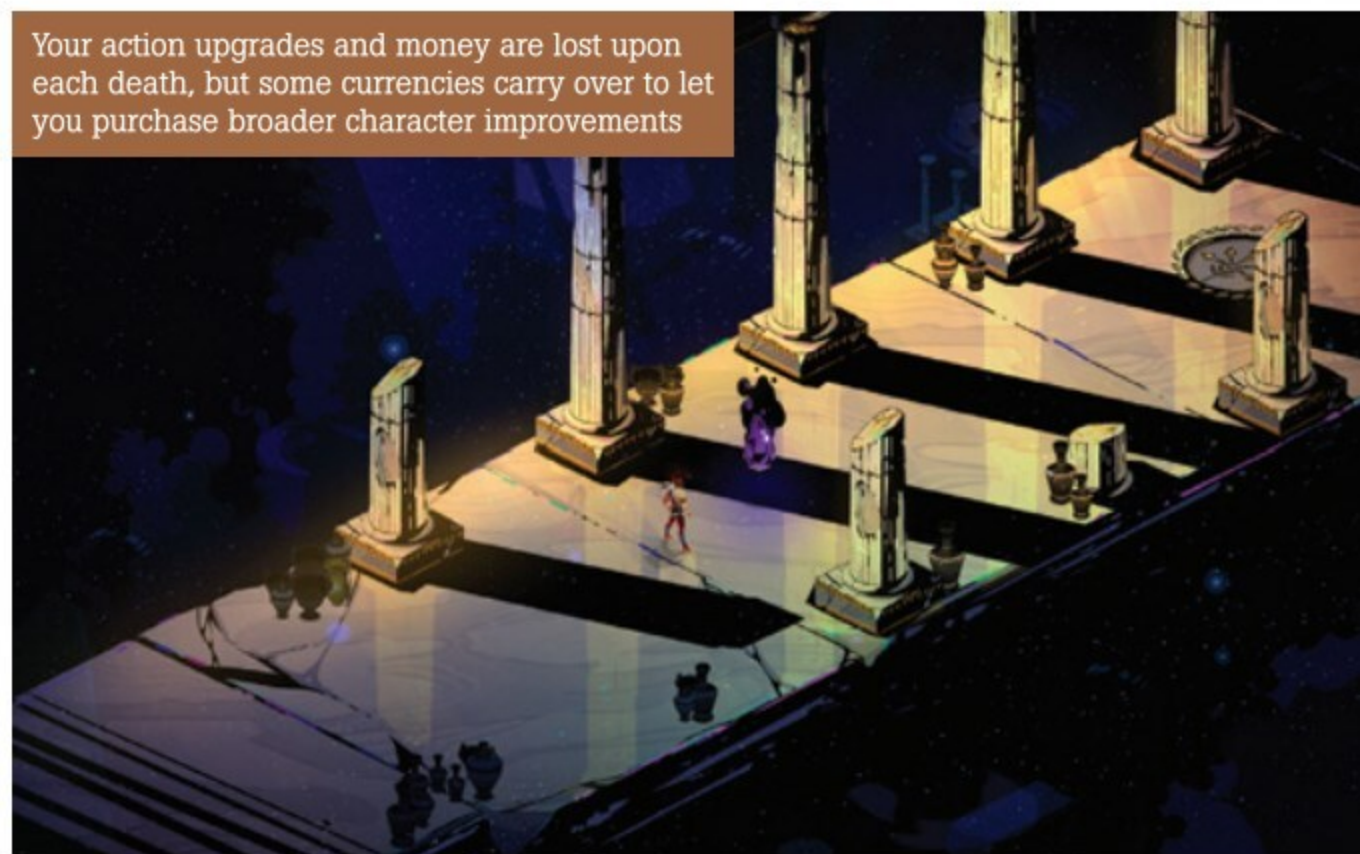
» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Supergiant Games

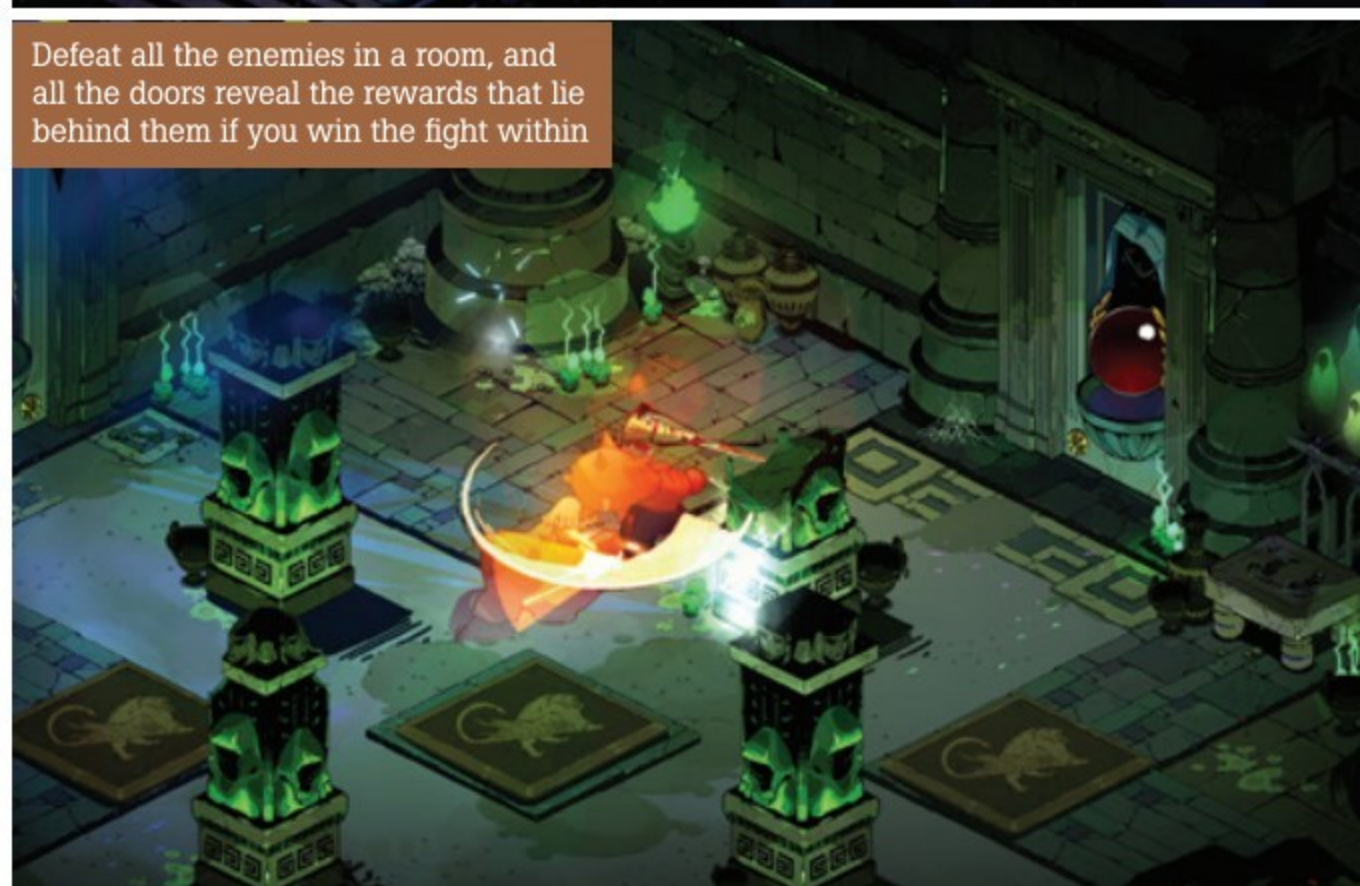
» **Developer**
Supergiant Games

» **Release**
2020

Your action upgrades and money are lost upon each death, but some currencies carry over to let you purchase broader character improvements



Defeat all the enemies in a room, and all the doors reveal the rewards that lie behind them if you win the fight within



Psychonauts 2

A welcome return

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Platforming

» **Publisher**
Starbreeze Studios

» **Developer**
Double Fine Productions

» **Release**
2019

It's been nearly a decade, but Psychonauts is finally getting its long-awaited sequel. Shown off recently at The Game Awards, Psychonauts 2's first true trailer gave a comprehensive look at what to expect from Double Fine's upcoming adventure.

The teaser showcased new and returning characters, with psychic acrobat Raz taking center stage again with a snazzy new look. Graduating from summer camp to the Motherlode HQ as a full-fledged Psychonaut, Raz offers his psychic powers to the Psychonaut agency's intern program. Teased as "much larger" than the campgrounds, the Motherlode HQ is the main hub players explore at their leisure.

As the newest intern, however, Raz struggles to prove himself amongst the other interns who are just as, if not more, talented.

"Raz thinks he's hot stuff because he was the king of the summer camp," Double Fine president and CEO Tim Schafer says. "And then he comes to the real headquarters and finds out all the other kids have also come from their own heroic backgrounds. They are all the best of the best from around the country and the world. He's no longer top dog."

Hollis Forsythe, a slick-looking agent and second in command at the agency, doesn't make this transition easier for Raz. Although she takes him under her wing at the intern program, Schafer describes her as "gruff" and "no nonsense," having little time to deal with Raz between heading the agency's situation room and dealing with budget cuts as Psychonauts feel less needed by the outside world.

Trying to fit in with other kids and dealing with intimidation are difficulties Raz faces, but they are far from the only ones. In Psychonauts 2, you're no longer solving a mystery about stolen children's brains, but instead trying to discover an agency mole after the kidnapping of agency head Truman Zanotto.

"They've rescued him, but he's not the same," Schafer says. "They try to figure out how he was kidnapped and conclude that there must be a mole in the Psychonauts. So they're trying to find out who the mole is and how they managed to do this."

This mystery additionally delves into Raz's own past, his family, and the circus where he grew up. Taking place after the events of 2017's VR adventure Rhombus of Ruin, some story threads continue from that title, but Schafer

assures fans it is not necessary to play through either the first Psychonauts or Rhombus of Ruin to enjoy and understand Psychonauts 2.

Schafer briefly spoke about psychic powers and how the team hopes to refine the platforming experience, but Double Fine isn't ready to discuss new abilities yet. In the trailer, we see Raz with his iconic levitation ball, pulling off stylish acrobatic moves and using telekinesis to mess with goats. Later in the trailer, Raz is surrounded by a slew of enemies, some familiar and others new. Bad Ideas are one of the new enemy types, which appear as purple foes with two large spikes protruding from their heads.

"[Bad Ideas] exist in everyone's head, and they're a real problem," Psychonauts 2 project lead Zak McClendon says.

The trailer ends with a quick view of some upcoming brain levels, which are playable segments occurring inside characters' minds. Some of these include a casino, a post office, and a morgue, though Double Fine is keeping most under wraps as a surprise.

With its unique continued storyline, we're eager to play through Psychonauts 2's promising world when it comes out in 2019. » **Elise Favis**





Phoenix Point

A strategy legend returns to challenge his own creation

The success of Firaxis Games' 2012 XCOM reboot is no secret, least of all to the creator of the original series, Julian Gollop. Now with his team at Snapshot Games, Gollop is designing his own updated take on XCOM in a spiritual sequel called Phoenix Point. While the Earth-versus-aliens combat certainly looks familiar, hardcore strategy fans will be pleasantly surprised by the underlying systems.

Like XCOM, Phoenix Point splits its focus between a globe-spanning base-management sim and an endless series of turn-based combat missions that play out on procedurally generated maps. My demo focuses on the latter, and tasks my five-man squad with neutralizing all the alien threats in an industrial neighborhood. First up: a grotesque beast appropriately dubbed Crabman.

After moving my soldiers into position, I set their sights on the crustaceous foe. Phoenix Point takes this action more literally than other tactical strategy games – instead of selecting an enemy and being locked into a one-size-fits-all shot resolved by a percentage-based dice roll, you're free to aim wherever you please. Each bullet fired in an attack then follows its own simulated trajectory, landing somewhere within the large aiming reticle. This unique aiming system allows you to target specific body parts of an enemy, which carry individual armor ratings. The Crabman's outer shell, for instance, rendered torso shots ineffective; his squishy face proved a far more viable, if smaller, target for my squad. Inflicting enough damage to a body part disables it, and often instills a negative status effect such as bleeding.

Phoenix Point also eschews XCOM's streamlined move-then-shoot formula in favor of a more open-ended action point system. A simple bar ticks off a soldier's movements, shots, and actions as you make them, all of which can be performed multiple times in any order. A secondary willpower system operates independently of a soldier's AP, and allows them to perform powerful class abilities. Examples include the sniper's Deadly Duo skill, which takes two shots at twice the accuracy, and the heavy's Rage Burst, which empties a full magazine at enemies.

I used the dual action systems to full effect in the ensuing battle. After clearing out more Crabmen, a small, xenomorph-like alien called a Mindfragger popped out of an abandoned building and latched onto my sniper's face,

taking control of him. Getting a clear line of sight on the beast required me to sprint my assault trooper into position, but left her AP fully depleted. However, by using my technician's Rally Troop ability, I was able to restore her willpower, then use her Rapid Clearance ability to dispatch the pesky foe before it could turn my incapacitated ally against me.

My demo only scratched the surface of Gollop's plans for Phoenix Point – other features like fully simulated factions, procedurally generated aliens based on world location, and dynamic enemy mutations driven by your actions have yet to be implemented, and frankly sound impossibly ambitious. Good thing the godfather of XCOM is used to dire odds.

» **Jeff Marchiafava**

» **Platform**
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy

» **Publisher**
Snapshot Games

» **Developer**
Snapshot Games

» **Release**
June





Blazing Chrome

A plasma blast from the past

- » **Platform**
PS4 • Switch • PC
- » **Style**
1 or 2-Player Action
- » **Publisher**
The Arcade Crew
- » **Developer**
JoyMasher
- » **Release**
2019

With its campy fonts, pixelated rendition of a world on the verge of destruction by sentient machines, and compressed audio voice samples, Blazing Chrome is a clear callback to the sidescrolling shooters of the late '80s and '90s. It's most reminiscent of Contra, and fans who've pined for that series' return should find plenty to like in developer JoyMasher's take on the run-and-gun concept.

As Mavra, one of two playable (and functionally identical) characters, slaughtering enemies at a rapid rate brought back fond memories. As with most shooters of this era, every hit is lethal, and you have a limited number of lives to forge ahead. One big difference here is that there are checkpoints throughout each level, so you don't go back to the starting line if you die. That said, you're still dumped a ways back if you lose all your lives.

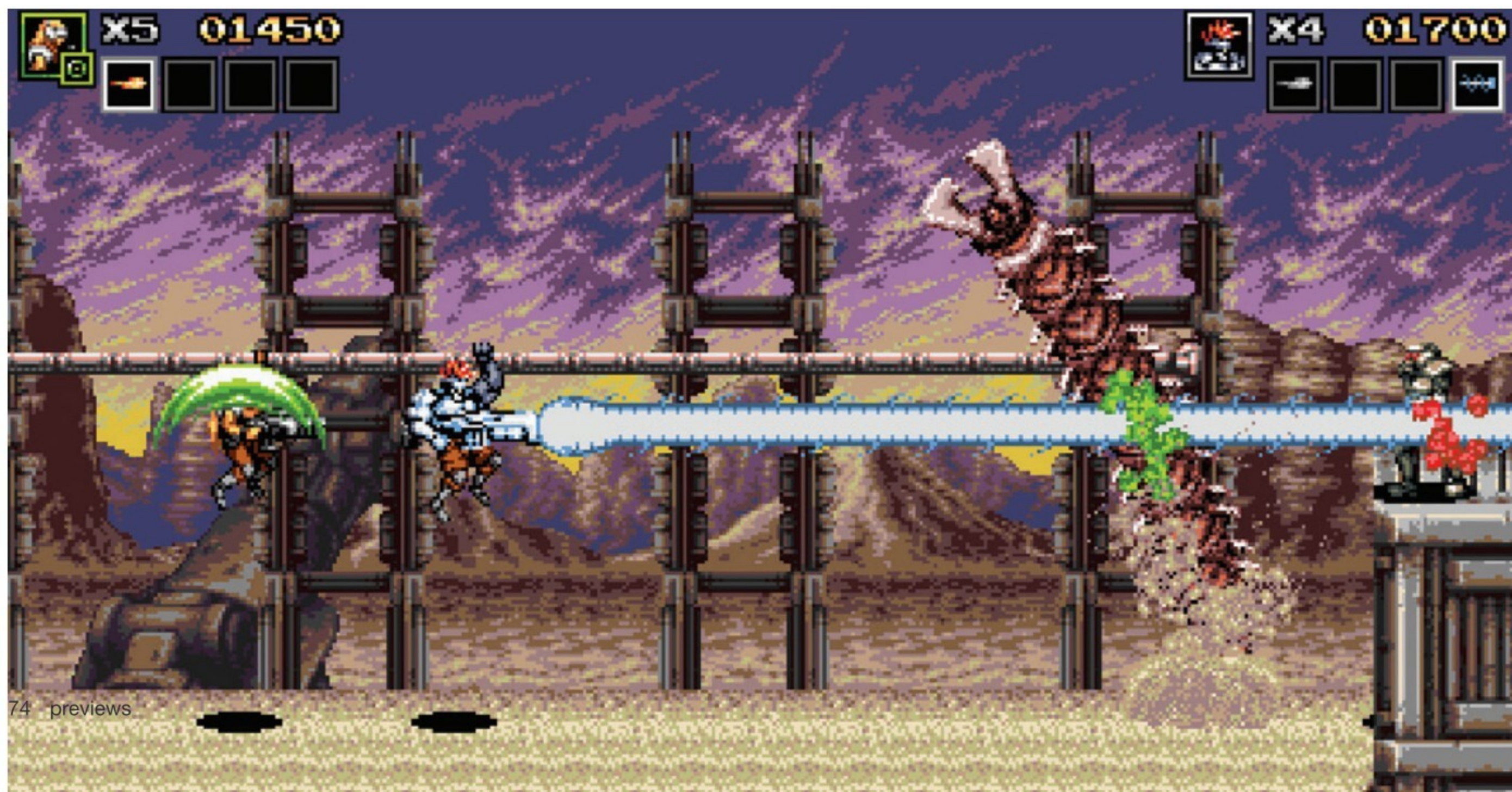
Luckily, power-ups make it easier to

avoid taking damage in the midst of the action, which often clutters up the screen in an overwhelming but fun way. Starting with a standard machine gun, you can quickly find upgrades including a powerful whip-like laser cannon, a grenade launcher that requires manual inputs for each shot, and a plasma beam you can charge to have it last longer and deal more damage. You can also find helper bots that let you take extra hits, move more quickly and double-jump, or give you an additional source of fire power. These bonuses definitely reminded me of the power fantasy that made Contra and Metal Slug such iconic hits, and I missed them when I died.

Action games are as much about level design as they are about your toolkit, and I liked what I saw in the two levels I played. At one point in the first level, I had to choose between commandeering a mech or hitching

a ride on a helicopter in order to deal with a particularly dense onslaught of enemies. Either option is viable, though barreling through the hordes with a mech is my preferred method of chaos. The second level had a scrolling sequence on a motorbike. I had full control over the bike and had to jump over bombs the baddies were lobbing. The bosses are impressive as well, animating their various moving parts with aplomb. These grotesque machines were tough to fight, but I enjoyed the challenge of shooting a giant monster to open up its weak point.

While we don't know how big Blazing Chrome's final release will be, I hope plenty more levels are like the ones I played. The core shooting may not deviate wildly from the games it takes its cues from, but the way JoyMasher executes on the fundamentals should earn it a spot on your radar early this year. » **Surriel Vazquez**



Resident Evil 2

The return of a horror classic



When rookie cop Leon Kennedy arrives in Raccoon City, he finds the police department that hired him and the city that houses it have both been overrun by zombies. It's a story familiar to Resident Evil fans going back 20 years, but Capcom is eager to introduce a whole new generation to the tale of Raccoon City's final days with a remake of one of its most beloved survival-horror titles.

Walking the fine line between new and old is difficult for any remake of classic media, though a game as steeped in its time-and-place gameplay as Resident Evil 2 makes the

tightrope particularly harrowing. While the gameplay has been completely overhauled, the whole of it still feels like Resident Evil 2, whether you're running around the circuitous hallways of the police department or shooting zombies. Those feelings of foreboding and resource scarcity are still intact despite the shifts of the camera and the ability to aim.

For those familiar with the game, it should not be a surprise to see Ada Wong, a mysterious woman who holds a vital role in the series' history, appear before Leon during his campaign. Her design starts off a little different

in a long trench coat and Jackie O. sunglasses, but she eventually ditches both in favor of her iconic red dress. While she deftly dodges Leon's questioning, she briefly tips her hand when she mentions she is looking for a woman named Annette Birkin.

Similarly, Claire Redfield, little sister to Chris, the previous game's S.T.A.R.S member, finds herself taking care of a young girl named Sherry. After Sherry gets forcibly taken away by an older man who threatens to kill Claire, the young Redfield enters the Raccoon City Police Department to find a keycard that will let her pursue her younger ward. It isn't long before she comes across T-00, also known as Mr. X, an intelligent Tyrant wearing a coat and hat nonetheless driven by a desire to kill the target in front of him.

Mr. X stalks Claire through the entirety of the police department, audible from rooms away as he slowly stomps through the building after her. This makes the act of trying to get the necessary keys, keycards, and puzzle solutions required to progress a distressing and intense journey of running and hiding in an attempt to survive.

Resident Evil 2 looks to be a strong addition to the series and one of the most ambitious top-to-bottom remakes ever made. Both newcomers and old-school fans alike should keep their eyes on this survival-horror classic reborn. » **Imran Khan**

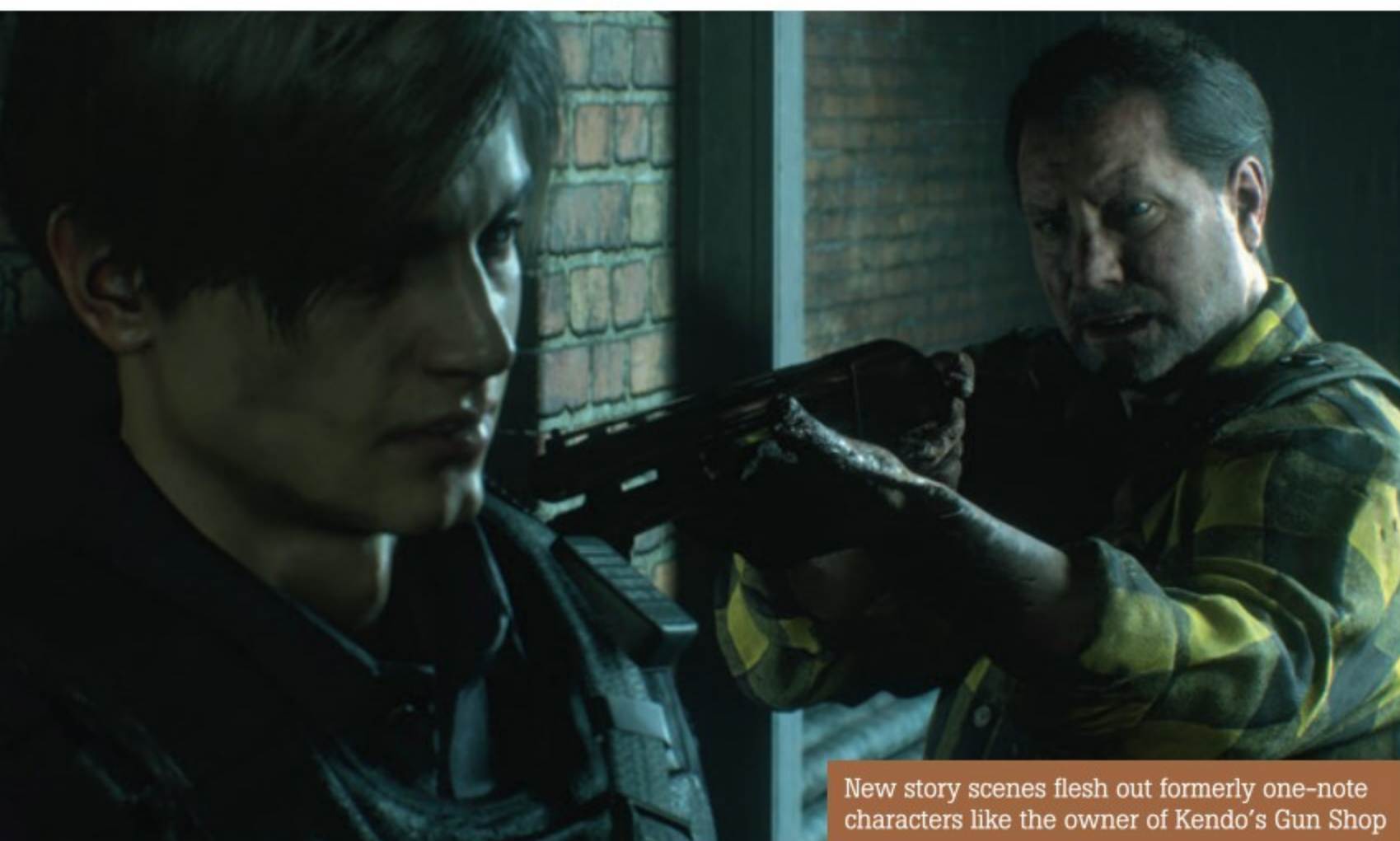
» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Capcom

» **Release**
January 25



New story scenes flesh out formerly one-note characters like the owner of Kendo's Gun Shop

Civilization VI: Gathering Storm

Man vs. nature

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy
(8-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
2K Games

» **Developer**
Firaxis Games

» **Release**
February 14

Over the course of thousands of years, humanity has left a massive imprint on our planet. Likewise, our big blue home has dramatically affected the rise and fall of our civilizations. Firaxis aims to explore our intimate relationship with mother nature in Civilization VI's second expansion, The Gathering Storm, which asks players to lead a nation while weathering nature's wrath.

In The Gathering Storm, natural disasters like floods, sand storms, and volcanoes can destroy cities and wipe out entire districts. Players' settlement choices are more important than ever as they try to avoid these dangers while also taking advantage of Earth's natural resources. Players also leave a mark on the environment. For instance, over-productivity can lead to torrid global temperatures, melting icecaps, and rising sea levels. Land tiles can turn into sea tiles, devastating coastal seaports. At the same time, new waterways can be exploited for trade routes.

"Although a lot of these natural effects are dangerous and can wipe

out portions of your empire, they also have a silver lining," says lead designer Ed Beach. "For example, if you think about the Nile river valley, that was a place where flooding was a constant worry, but it was also very fertile. Building there can be fruitful, but if I were settling there, I might want to prioritize dam-building technology and move important city districts away from floodplains."

In addition to a more active ecosystem, Firaxis has revamped its diplomacy system. Civilizations now earn favor with other countries through trade, offering emergency aid, and by keeping other political promises. During the Medieval era, all nations kick off a series of meetings called the World Congress, where they exchange ideas and vote on worldwide policies. Players can capitalize on the favor they garnered throughout the game to tilt votes, and ultimately win the game, if they convince other nations to crown them world leader.

In addition to eight new civilizations, nine new leaders, and a variety of new districts and wonders, The Gathering

Storm extends the Technology and Civics trees into a future era. Unlike previous Civilization games, the placement and order of the future tech and civics trees are randomized, so every time players enter the future era they must adapt their strategies.

"We decided we needed to go into the future era because climate change is something that we're grappling with right now," Beach says. "We don't really know how that's going to play out, and it's something that will take us, at least, 50 years to see where that goes, so we thought that our game needed to project into the future so when players had a planet with too much carbon in the atmosphere, they could decide if they wanted to let it be ruined or try to save it. We wanted to give that time to let that play out."

Civilization VI: Gathering Storm launches on February 14, which just so happens to be Valentine's Day. But that release might be incredibly apropos, as senior producer Dennis Shirk jokes, "We wanted to embrace our reputation as a relationship killer."

» **Ben Reeves**



MechWarrior 5: Mercenaries

A long time coming

In its heyday, MechWarrior was the mech game everyone played by virtue of it being the only competitor in the space. Times have changed since the '90s. While MechWarrior Online has certainly cultivated a loyal following, single-player iterations of the once-popular series have been sparse since the early 2000s due to murky IP rights disputes. With MechWarrior 5, Piranha Games is looking to return the series to its former glory. We ventured to the cloudy city of Vancouver during Mech_Con to play a slice of MechWarrior 5 and see if the fifth entry has a shot of standing out in a crowd filled with the likes of Titanfall, Into The Breach, and Hawken. Luckily, developer Piranha Games has something very special on its hands.

We played a single mission from the campaign starring the unnamed protagonist – an orphan of war who grows up to lead a mercenary band of mech pilots. On a quest for revenge, the leader and his square of three mechs stomp across a gorgeous green landscape to fend the local population against another mercenary group. During the mission, I engaged a series of helicopters and bi-pedal mechs in a wheat field, using my lasers to blast the pesky aircraft out of the sky (and set the fields ablaze). Later on, I fought foes in a crowded cityscape, destroying entire buildings by merely brushing against them in a display of the game's impressive destructibility system. Substituting your A.I. allies with human players in the game's drop-in, drop-out co-op mode leads to even more zany, explosive antics.



A new destructibility system allows you to bring buildings and structures crashing to the ground during combat

Simply moving around in the mech is an interesting experience. Whereas Titanfall strives to make controlling a mech just as easy and nimble as its speedy pilots, the machines in MechWarrior are more like tanks, with the design focused on making you feel the weight of every lumbering step. The combat itself is a fascinating balance between breezy first-person shooting and tactical simulations, with you having to switch between weapons and manage your heat meter so you don't have an emergency shutdown. These shutdowns can leave you open to severe and even fatal attacks for a few precious seconds. To succeed, you have to master a sort of rhythmic battle, with High Temp (laser) follow-

ing Low Temp (minigun) while also figuring out where to aim on your opponent's mech.

Outside of the combat, there's also an enticing XCOM-like metagame where you recruit pilots and purchase new mechs by salvaging the remains of your foes. Pilots are more like characters than fodder. Each have statistics that can be improved by taking them on multiple missions. However, if a pilot dies, they are gone for good, so don't put all your mecheggs in one basket.

All in all, there's more than enough fun in MechWarrior 5's destructive gameplay to have us excited about the series' return to the stage. We can't wait to load up in mechs of our own come next fall. » **Javy Gwaltney**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Piranha Games

» **Developer**
Piranha Games

» **Release**
September 10

MechWarrior 5 has drop-in multiplayer so you can invite friends to wreak havoc alongside you



Granblue Fantasy: Relink

A beautiful, action-packed journey

» **Platform**
PS4

» **Style**
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing
Online (TBA)

» **Publisher**
Cygames

» **Developer**
Cygames,
Platinum Games

» **Release**
TBA

Granblue Fantasy has garnered plenty of fanfare since its Japanese mobile debut in 2014. Now the series is expanding and moving both to the PlayStation 4 and North America. What makes the franchise special is its combination of two big names synonymous with JRPGs: artist Hideo Minaba and composer Nobuo Uematsu, both known for their outstanding work on the Final Fantasy series. With the help of Platinum Games, an acclaimed studio known for its flair with stylish action games like Bayonetta and Nier: Automata, Granblue Fantasy: Relink looks to make a mark on the 3D action/RPG space.

True to the original, you name and choose a male or female character. Released footage shows you chasing after a large tornado, only to come face-to-face with a beast that changes forms. There's more than meets the eye to this foe, as it soon turns into a goddess, drawing a super-charged sword. Story details are still minimal and a larger question lingers: Who is controlling this deadly force?

Relink's combat centers on an easy-to-learn combo system. As you chain



strikes and perform team attacks, you fill up a gauge. Once this is full, you can perform devastating and flashy chain-burst attacks with your teammates to turn the tide of battle. Each character's skill set and attacks can be customized and assigned to the face buttons for easy access. Combat looks promising

with its focus on dodging attacks and breaking through enemies' armor.

So far, Granblue Fantasy: Relink has all the RPG standbys, from treasure chests to battling larger-than-life foes. Throw in the gorgeous visuals and the flashy combat, and it's worth keeping an eye on. » **Kimberley Wallace**

Granblue Fantasy: Versus

Bringing the RPG style to some flashy fighting

» **Platform**
PS4

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Fighting,
Online (TBA)

» **Publisher**
Cygames

» **Developer**
Cygames,
Arc System Works

» **Release**
2019

The Granblue franchise has a large-scale RPG in the works, but that's not the only thing in store. Cygames also announced a new anime fighter, teaming up with famed developer Arc System Works, the studio responsible for popular series such as BlazBlue and Guilty Gear. With a unique art style and an aim for accessibility, Granblue Fantasy: Versus might just be the next fighting-game darling.

The series has already made its mark on Japan with 23 million playing the mobile game. Versus capitalizes on that appeal, using more than 10 popular Granblue Fantasy characters as fighters, from protagonist Gran to powerful knight Katalina. The fighter isn't shying away from incorporating elements from the original RPG, including the story beats. Specifics on this haven't been revealed yet, but the developers say it's being presented in a way to appeal to both fans and newcomers.

Granblue Fantasy: Versus is also striving to be accessible. All special moves are triggered with a single button press, and you focus on blocking and chaining combos. Your road to victory is simple: Land hits to build

up your attack gauge, which triggers super-powerful moves that decimate the opponent. Even though this simple approach is newcomer-friendly, deeper strategy lurks for diehard competitors. The developers hope it makes its way onto the esports scene.

Granblue Fantasy: Versus carries with it the striking anime art style that helped make the franchise so popular,

but the 2D-fighter takes it a step further with more detailed and sophisticated character models. It's one of the most gorgeous fighting games I've seen in recent years, and its fast pace and flashy moves make for exciting matches. More information is promised in the future, including details on extra game modes. For now, enjoy the beauty. » **Kimberley Wallace**





Scrappers

It's time to take out the trash

The arcade brawler's heyday may be over, but the spirit definitely lives on in games like Scrappers. The newest title from Q-Games, the purveyors of Pixeljunk titles, Scrappers channels the multiplayer mayhem of old school beat 'em ups with a heavy emphasis on attaining high scores and cooperative gameplay.

Scrappers puts players in the roles of four robotic trash-pickers running alongside a garbage truck and picking up trash to throw in. The goal is obvious: Fill the truck with whatever scrap

you can find on the street. Vending machines, soda cans, boxes, and other robotic people that get in your way can be picked up and deposited for dollar amounts befitting their size. The catch is that, while you can stack the potential scrap, you can only stack smaller things on top of bigger ones. This means you can't grab some soda cans and then pick up a vending machine, so you better plan your route accordingly.

The heavier items you take, the slower your robot sanitation professional

moves, which can be a bit of a problem when keeping up with a moving truck. Luckily, the vehicle will stop once it's full to compress down, giving you time to catch up as long as everyone else is constantly dumping in items. Designating roles among the players to decide who focuses on heavier items might make an easier time.

Even waste disposal is better when done in cooperation, which helps manage how chaotic the rough and robotic streets can become.

» **Imran Khan**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Q-Games

» **Developer**
Q-Games

» **Release**
2019

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gameinformer

GAME OF THE MONTH

92 Super Smash Bros. Ultimate

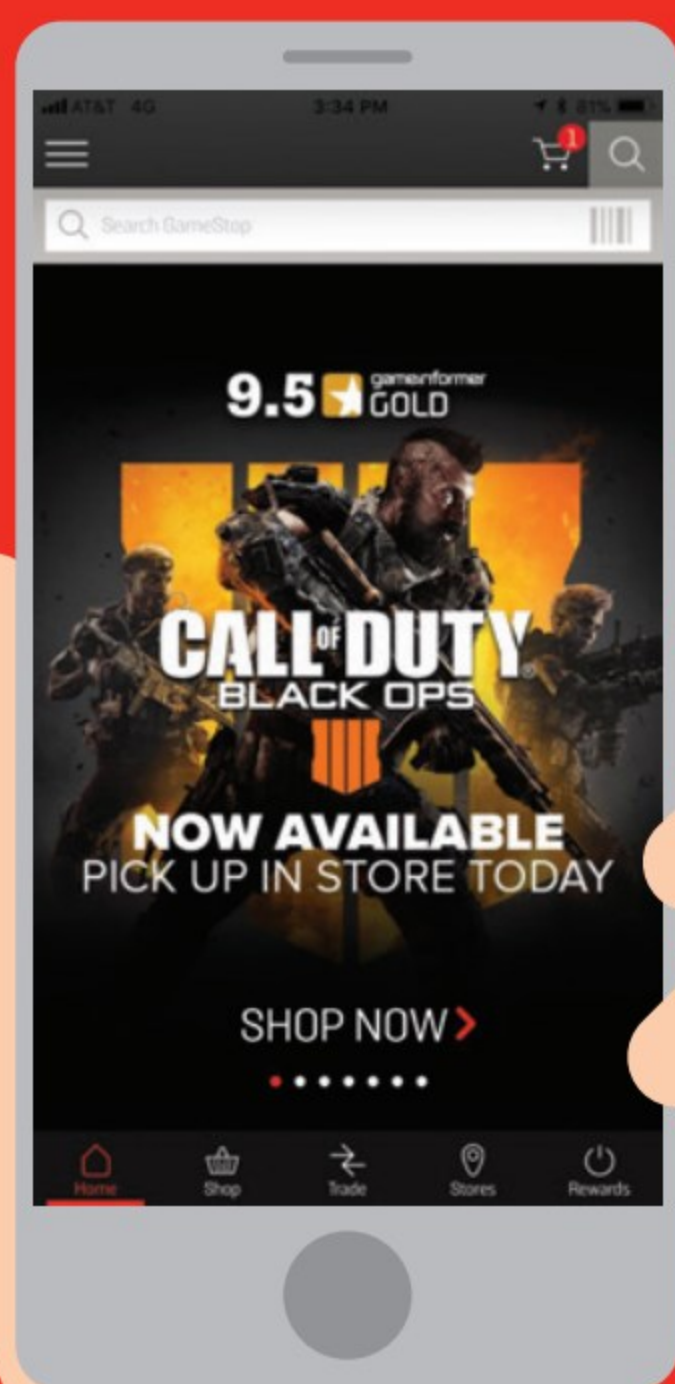
Ultimate is a remarkable package, including every fighter and nearly every stage that's appeared in the series since its N64 debut. More importantly, it's incredibly fun. Whether you're dabbling in classic multiplayer matches or playing solo in the new World of Light mode, it's easy to see why Smash is so beloved.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Lumbago.

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue



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Just Cause 4

An explosive sandbox of possibilities

8

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Avalanche Studios **Release** December 4 **Rating** M

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept

Create the Just Cause series' biggest and most diverse open world for Rico to "liberate" (i.e., blow stuff up in)

» Graphics

Aside from some pop-in, Just Cause 4 is a gorgeous game that runs at a smooth and consistent framerate

» Sound

Mediocre voice acting takes a backseat to a strong soundtrack and the unending cacophony of war

» Playability

The refined controls do a good job of accommodating Rico's high-speed, death-defying antics

» Entertainment

Few games serve up more nonstop action and destructive freedom than Just Cause 4

» Replay Value

Moderate

When Rico Rodriguez raided his first island nation in the original Just Cause, fans were entertained by a singular, satisfying objective: blow stuff up in the most exciting and ridiculous ways possible. Three games later, your goal remains largely the same, but new destructive tools, customization options, and the series' largest physics-based sandbox yet deliver a steady stream of mayhem and hilarity.

When I first started Just Cause 4, it didn't make a great first impression. The main menu screen requires a hefty load time, and many cutscenes suffer from stuttering framerates and perplexingly low-res textures. The story those scenes convey also isn't anything to write home about; Rico Rodriguez finds himself on yet another island that needs liberating from the Black Hand mercenary group, which has served as the antagonizing force in most of the previous entries. Add in some confusing progression and customization menus that take a while to wrap your head around, and I had some serious doubts about whether Just Cause 4 would live up to my previous enjoyment of the series.

Those doubts didn't last long once I began exploring Just Cause 4's diverse and beautiful open world. One of the biggest criticisms lodged at Just Cause 3 was its stuttering and inconsistent framerate, and Avalanche's number-one priority here is clearly the gameplay. Even when I was laying siege to the Black Hand's most fortified strongholds, ziplining between

attack helicopters and showering the battlefield with the debris of every radar dish, propane tank, and enemy vehicle I could set my sights on, the frame rate held up, and the visuals continued to dazzle.

While players can find an arsenal of satisfyingly overpowered weapons strewn about every enemy stronghold, your most invaluable tool remains Rico's grappler. The handy arm cannon allows you to flex your destructive creativity by suspending objects via giant balloons, tethering them together with cables, or turning pretty much anything into an improvised missile with rocket boosters. Rico's grappling hook, parachute, and wingsuit also turn him into a veritable super hero, and make zipping around the island a breeze. Sticking a squad of enemy soldiers with airlifters and inflating them into the stratosphere isn't the smartest way to win a ground conflict, but it sure is entertaining.

Liberating Solis is slightly more involved than previous entries. Instead of just blowing up everything that's painted red (which you're still encouraged to do), Rico undergoes discrete missions to soften up each district before advancing the frontlines of the war, which is represented by endless clashes between the Black Hand and Rico's Army of Chaos. These liberation missions become repetitive, but are augmented by three different chains of missions that feed your grappler upgrades. The main story missions provide further variety, and are also broken down into several chains based on biome-specific weather storms that

have Rico chasing tornados and wing-suiting his way through sandstorms, blizzards, and deadly lightning storms (not recommended, by the way). All in all, Just Cause 4's missions offer up plenty of manic fun, even if I was ready to never flip another circuit breaker once the final pocket of Solis was liberated.

Just Cause 4 occasionally gets too difficult for its own good, bombarding you with swarms of enemies that have no qualms about taking potshots from afar. This was also an issue in previous entries, but the gunplay has improved; even the most bullet-spongy enemy can be downed with a few headshots, and generous checkpoints ensure steady progress through even the most difficult missions. Being able to commandeer an enemy helicopter and blow your attackers to kingdom come also helps stem the frustration.

Most of my favorite moments in Just Cause 4 had nothing to do with the story missions, and instead emerged out of playing with Rico's ridiculous toolset – like turning a dumpster into a humble airship with a couple of balloons and riding it across the island, or rigging the horses on a merry-go-round with rocket boosters and watching it spin out of control. If you can devise a stupid and dangerous use for Rico's grappler, you can probably pull it off – and I've got a hard drive full of hilarious videos to prove it. Just like any good sandbox game, Just Cause 4 gives you the freedom to make your own fun, and has kept me experimenting and entertained for hours after the credits rolled.

» **Jeff Marchiafava**

Gris

Not all who wander are lost

Style 1-Player Platforming **Publisher** Devolver Digital **Developer** Nomada Studio **Release** December 13 **Rating** E

8.25

Switch • PC • Mac

» **Concept**

Platform through a beautiful world of grief, solving puzzles along the way

» **Graphics**

The world is alluring, but more importantly, everything works together to serve the broader gameplay

» **Sound**

The music is suitably evocative and harmonizes with the game as a whole

» **Playability**

Gris' commands are few, but it builds upon them to produce enjoyable, revelatory moments

» **Entertainment**

Offers a well-crafted invitation for exploration on multiple levels, though Gris is neither a walk in the park nor a brain-wrangling title

» **Replay Value**

Moderately low

The protagonist of Gris charts her own way out of sadness, and while grief is often navigated alone, that is not necessarily the case here. Her path isn't straightforward, but the game's well-designed gameplay and levels don't make you feel helpless and isolated, instead delivering catharsis.

The visual style immediately stoked my interest. It's arresting and stylistic, accented by interesting and appropriate movements of the camera. The graphics' clean lines are still expressive and often a fundamental part of the puzzles, instructive in how players can move about the world and interact with it. With that also comes enriching aural flourishes that further pull you in and changes of color that help express the protagonists' progression.

Gris' unnamed protagonist does not have a lot of powers in her arsenal, but make no mistake: This game is not just a pretty-looking, light platformer. What abilities she does have to influence environments build throughout the game, such as her dress becoming weighty or flowing to burst through or float across levels. The use of these powers is meted out to produce satisfying moments and to make sure there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach to problems. One of my favorite reoccurring sequences involves



reverse-gravity areas, a nice confluence of the game's form and function that also shows off Gris' ability to deliver precise platforming.

I appreciate how Gris' level design encourages exploration without sowing confusion, frustration, or leaving you lost when it comes to the larger tasks of solving puzzles or advancing the story. It's not easy for a game to both give players a sense of exploration while still maintaining a framework for levels and puzzle gameplay that doesn't make you feel like you're simply moving from one

task to the next. Even during backtracking, in Gris it's like you're seeing things for the first time because of the flow of the levels and the art style. This keeps it from feeling like you're a rat enclosed in the walls of a maze simply bumping into things until you get it right.

Gris' story is open to a range of interpretations, and it's not important that you arrive at a specific meaning. Instead, in creating a well-constructed game, developer Nomada Studio has laid the foundations by which you can find your own sight and voice. » **Matthew Kato**





Ashen

Turning strangers into friends

Style 1-Player Action (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive **Developer** A44 **Release** December 7 **Rating** T

8

Xbox One • PC

Ashen has a distinct look and its creatures are wildly imaginative, but no level of creativity can hide the fact that it is a shameless Dark Souls clone. New Zealand-based developer A44 fully embraces this inspiration to deliver almost identical combat, exploration, and a risk-based currency of souls. While feeling overly similar to From Software's body of work, Ashen pumps out excitement and fun, and manages to carve out a hint of something new with how it handles cooperative play.

I died five times in a lengthy dungeon and began thinking I would never get through it. On my next life, I was joined by a player who complemented my style of play. We marched through this challenging gauntlet and made short work of its boss; I lucked out in finding a partner that could help me. This type of passive cooperative play is where Ashen establishes a unique and powerful pulse. If another player is at the same point in the story, you may be matched. As I illustrated, this can be a boon. Having someone draw the attention of enemies away from you completely changes the difficulty pendulum from an enemy's advantage to yours.

The cooperative play is designed similarly to Journey's in that you can't communicate with the other player or try to become friends with them. They are with you for your current objective, and will vanish as soon as you attempt fast travel or die. While there were players I wish I could have played the entire game with, the feeling of losing a helping hand is a part of what makes this experience tick. It's a crushing loss, but at the same time, that person likely helped you reach a

new milestone. You created that one awesome memory with them. Sure, there are players I played with that, well, sucked, and I ended up wasting time with, but that's all part of the luck of the draw. If another player isn't around, you'll be teamed up with an A.I.-driven teammate that will likely get you into a world of hurt.

If you don't trust random players or the computer, A44 implemented a complicated system that allows friends to journey together. I know this sounds like an awesome thing, but it ends up being a pain given how many hoops you have to jump through to play with a buddy. You are forced to change a couple of options, enter in a code that you must share with a friend, and stand in the same spot in the world. If you fast travel or die, you must repeat these steps. I had great fun playing with friends, but every session ended with us questioning why it was designed this way. We found we were better off playing with randoms for the sake of time than trying to enter each other's worlds.

No matter who you are paired with, you enter the world of Ashen at a point of unrest. For thousands of years these lands have been blanketed in darkness. The awakening of the Ashen god has brought a glimmer of light and the hope of peace. You are tasked to help the light expand, and must protect it from forces that want the world to remain in darkness. Yes, this story boils down to the overdone light-versus-dark motif, but has a nice mythological undercurrent to it, and introduces several interesting characters along the way. They end up having decent stories to tell. As you complete

missions for each character, they offer you a wider assortment of items and remedies, and you watch their home grow. It feels good to help them out, even if most of their missions are of the fetch-quest variety.

The journey embraces exploration and venturing off the beaten path to uncover secrets – even if it means risking all to leap across bottomless pits. The jumping mechanics work well, and the environmental puzzles are designed nicely – offering a clear path to the loot once you discover it. The journey you are on is challenging, but fair. It pushes you to complete all the side content to stand a better chance on the critical path.

While players have a variety of weapon, armor, and talisman types to choose from, combat is sadly the most derivative part of the experience. Alternating between light and heavy attacks, dodge-rolling, and keeping an eye on your stamina meter at all times are just some of the ways it feels familiar. The five bosses are clever in design, but none of the techniques you use to fell them rise above the standard hack-and-slash mix. The combat is functionally sound and reliable, but doesn't stand out in any way.

Ashen is at its best when you and a stranger are standing victorious over the corpse of a giant creature. You want to say "thank you," or exchange a high-five, but the only thing you can do is spin around in a circle or jump frantically to simulate a sense of glee. Even with so much of the experience feeling similar to something else you've played, Ashen delivers a great sense of wonder in its world, and ends up being a fun journey. » **Andrew Reiner**

» Concept

Drawing heavy inspiration from Dark Souls, this difficult journey feels familiar, yet successfully etches out its own identity by always having a helper at your side

» Graphics

The game has a unique style, almost looking like it was molded out of clay. The characters and creatures look cool, even without facial features. The world hits the same notes, delivering beautiful backdrops that look great from afar, but appear to be textureless upon further inspection

» Sound

Outside of the clanking of swords and roaring of monsters, the soundtrack is effectively quiet, sometimes offering just a strum of a guitar or a held note

» Playability

Dark Souls' DNA was harvested for combat and traversal. Teaming up with other random players works well, but you run into instances where they have a different agenda than you do, and you are left on your own

» Entertainment

Collecting souls is as nerve-wracking and rewarding as ever, but the real joy Ashen brings to this deadly dance is sharing those memories with strangers

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Battle Princess Madelyn

Retro to a fault

7.25

PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Concept

Explore a loving homage to Ghouls 'n Ghosts that features an unabashed retro aesthetic

» Graphics

A huge variety of monsters, environments, and effects helps the pixel art shine

» Sound

Two distinct instrumentations of the soundtrack lend either an orchestral or chiptune effect to the adventure

» Playability

Good platforming and combat controls, but the absence of quest tracking or maps is a real bummer

» Entertainment

With both arcade and story modes, there's a lot of old-school charm to enjoy, but be prepared for some old-school frustration as well

» Replay Value

Moderate

Style 1-Player Action/Platforming **Publisher** Causal Bit Games, Hound Picked Games
Developer Causal Bit Games **Release** December 6 (Xbox One, PC), December 20 (PS4, Switch) **Rating** E

Romanticizing the past is easy, but older games shouldn't always be held up as examples to follow. The retro aesthetic has plenty of appeal, including a simplicity of concept and presentation that can be refreshing set against modern behemoths. But old-school styling and design can also add up to frustration, aimlessness, and exasperating difficulty. Battle Princess Madelyn nails the throwback vibe it's shooting for, and in so doing, exhibits both the highs and lows of the games from which it draws inspiration. If someone told you this was a lost sequel to Ghouls 'n Ghosts rediscovered after all these years, it would be easy to believe.

Battle Princess Madelyn unleashes the titular royal on a side-scrolling world filled with creeping undead, giant snakes, and demonic trees. Her family has been kidnapped by a malevolent force, and she flings an endless supply of spears and swords to overcome the threat. Through charming (if simply drawn) characters and cameos, the story takes on a personal vibe, and showcases a plucky, capable heroine with spark and panache.

The game features two different game modes, using the same environmental backgrounds, but with totally different level designs and approaches to progression. The story mode is a lengthier quest with lots of new items to unlock

and secrets to discover, while the arcade mode is a more straightforward and linear path through challenging battles and platforming. These modes result in significant replay potential.

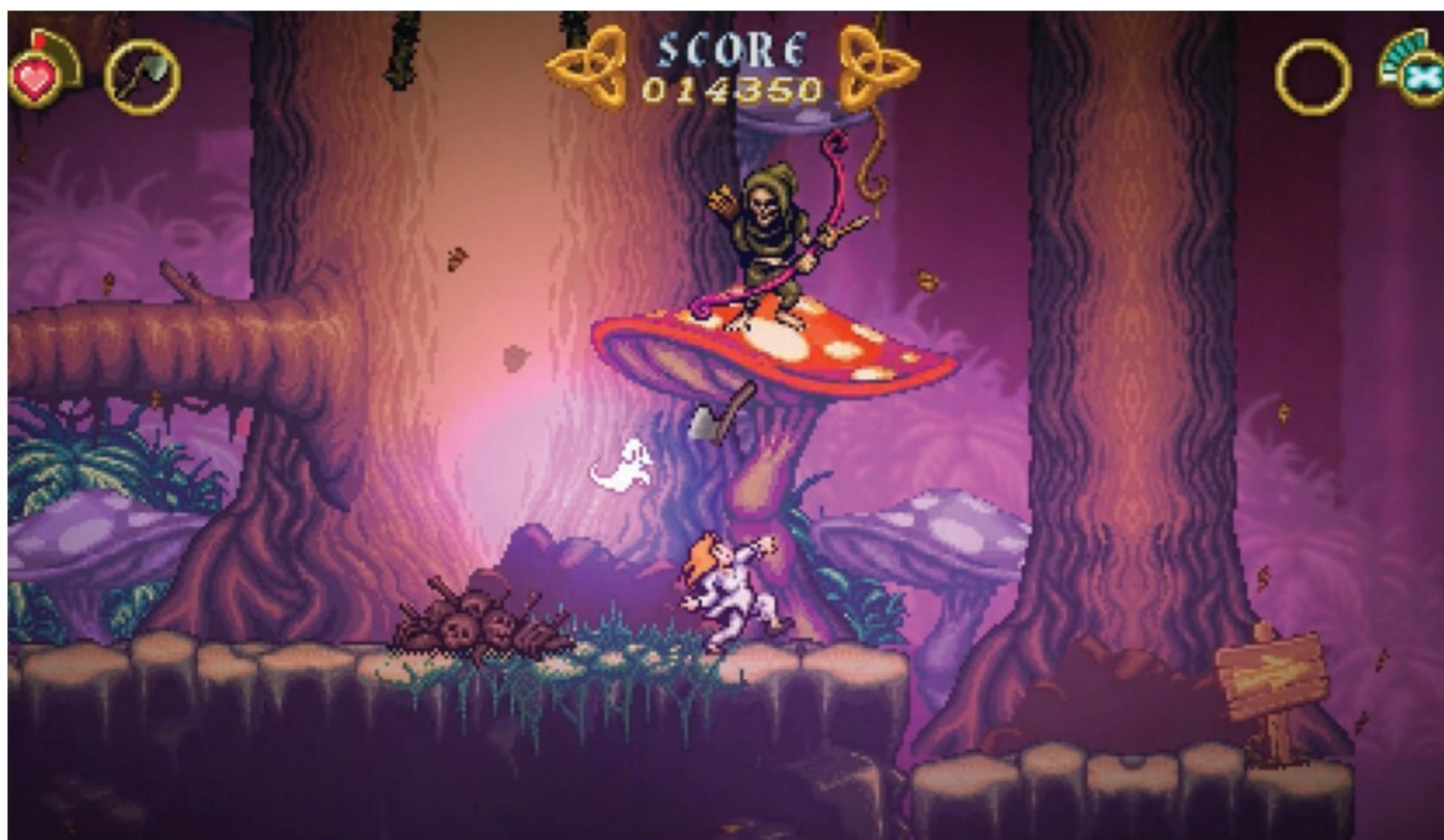
The story mode provides a satisfying progression of new weapons and armor, though I was disappointed that I ran out of things to spend my currency on well before the game's conclusion. I encountered a multitude of side missions to tackle, but the absence of a quest log or directional aids makes them all blur together, and it's often difficult to tell the difference between critical objectives or missions that just net you some extra currency.

I was continually impressed by the variety of monsters, animations, and environments to discover; the desire to see the next area helps motivate continued play. Simple but enjoyable fantasy combat kept me mashing buttons for hours, and the platforming is often difficult, but usually rewarding. Unfortunately, the levels are often confusing to navigate, offering little guidance on how to push the story forward. A smartly implemented hint system alleviates some of the worst offenses, if you check those tips out. In addition, your trusty ghost-dog companion also barks and helps steer you toward important objects. Even so, the long checkpoints, frequent blind death drops, and extended vertical

climbs that characterize many levels all add more frustration than enjoyment. Many story mode levels also demand backtracking after a boss fight or to find particular sub-levels; pacing would often be better if I was just teleported back to a dungeon entrance or quest completion.

The arcade mode offers a cleaner, more straightforward homage to the original formula. But players should be prepared for a devilish difficulty curve that might crush your spirit long before you see credits. I enjoyed the arcade style the most after first completing the story mode, at which point the added challenge felt manageable but still appropriately punishing.

Battle Princess Madelyn has a sweet, personal touch to it that shines through in the final product, as well as a message about the value of family. The game was built in part as a father's message to his real-life daughter, and whether you know that backstory or not, it lends the story and gameplay a heartfelt and wholesome tone. The Ghouls 'n Ghosts formula is a lesser-tapped classic that is reinvigorated here with skill, but some structural and design elements hold the experience back from greatness. I hope we get to see more adventures with Madelyn and her family; with some refinement, this whimsically macabre world would be a joy to explore again. » **Matt Miller**



Beat Saber

Engrossing musical swordplay



Style 1-Player Rhythm/Music **Publisher** Beat Games **Developer** Beat Games **Release** November 20 **Rating** E

9

PSVR

When virtual reality became a real product we could have in our homes, the platform promised the potential of lush, engaging, and fully realized worlds. We're still working toward that future, but while we're waiting, Beat Saber offers one of virtual reality's best experiences. It doesn't create a new world to explore; instead Beat Saber focuses on placing you in a song and giving you the tools to participate in its rhythms in ways that traditional music games can't.

In Beat Saber you use two light swords (one blue and one red), and you swing them using Move controllers. Red and blue blocks fly toward you, indicating which saber you should use to hit them. Along with being color coded, the blocks also have arrows dictating the direction of your chop. A blue block flying at you on your right with an arrow pointing north requires you to attack it from the bottom swiping upward. A red block coming from the left with a westward pointing arrow requires you to swipe through it from right to left. These blocks fly at you in time with the music booming in your ears, and when you find the rhythm and take down each block, you feel like you're conducting a violent symphony. It's beautiful.

A clinical description of how the gameplay works really doesn't do it justice. Wielding light sabers to destroy blocks as the music and light show fully envelops you lets you focus on the task at hand with extreme precision. The music and visuals fully take over your peripherals, engrossing you and making you feel the music. It wasn't long before I was slashing blocks based purely on the rhythm, embracing the choreography of each song and focusing less on the arrows on the blocks. It makes the experience a fantastic showcase for the platform and genuinely feels like something that wouldn't work outside of a headset.

With driving beats and dance-worthy intensity, every song is enjoyable and perfect for the style of gameplay Beat Saber offers. However, compared to other rhythm and music games, the diversity isn't there. The original soundtrack (no licensed songs here) stays rooted in techno-centric beats, and there are only 16 so you end up playing the same songs a lot.

Despite the repeated songs, the gameplay doesn't grow stale. Early on, you simply grasp for high scores,



but you eventually encounter tasks like completing a song without making wide arm movements, or missing a specific number of blocks without failing. The campaign also offers a deep challenge, dipping into the extreme difficulties before showing you the finish line. Even if you've been playing Beat Saber for months in early access on Vive and Rift, the campaign offers a worthwhile and enjoyable challenge.

You have an assortment of options for tackling songs outside of the campaign. You can do no-fail mode (helpful for learning the more difficult songs), play without arrows on the blocks, or play with single-color blocks. You can also elect to turn on modifiers for score boosts, like playing a song at double

speed or making the arrows disappear from the blocks right before you swipe through them. I liked all these modifiers and how they added gameplay variety, which is important considering the small track list.

Beat Saber is a must-play for anyone interested in virtual reality, but not for the reasons we typically associate with the platform. It won't make you crane your neck to take in the majesty of your surroundings, but Beat Saber uses VR to place you into the music and taps into your carnal desire to hit things with swords. Years into its life, the gaming public is still unsure of this new way to play video games, but Beat Saber has the potential to convince skeptics to take another look. » **Kyle Hilliard**

» Concept

Brandishing light sabers, you slash through moving blocks in time with music in virtual reality

» Graphics

The vaguely futuristic setting is all about highlighting playability and broadcasting your goals. It may not feature the most beautiful or distinct art, but it's all in service of gameplay

» Sound

The track list is small compared to other music games, and you won't find any familiar classic licensed songs. However, the selection is intense and perfect for Beat Saber's style of gameplay

» Playability

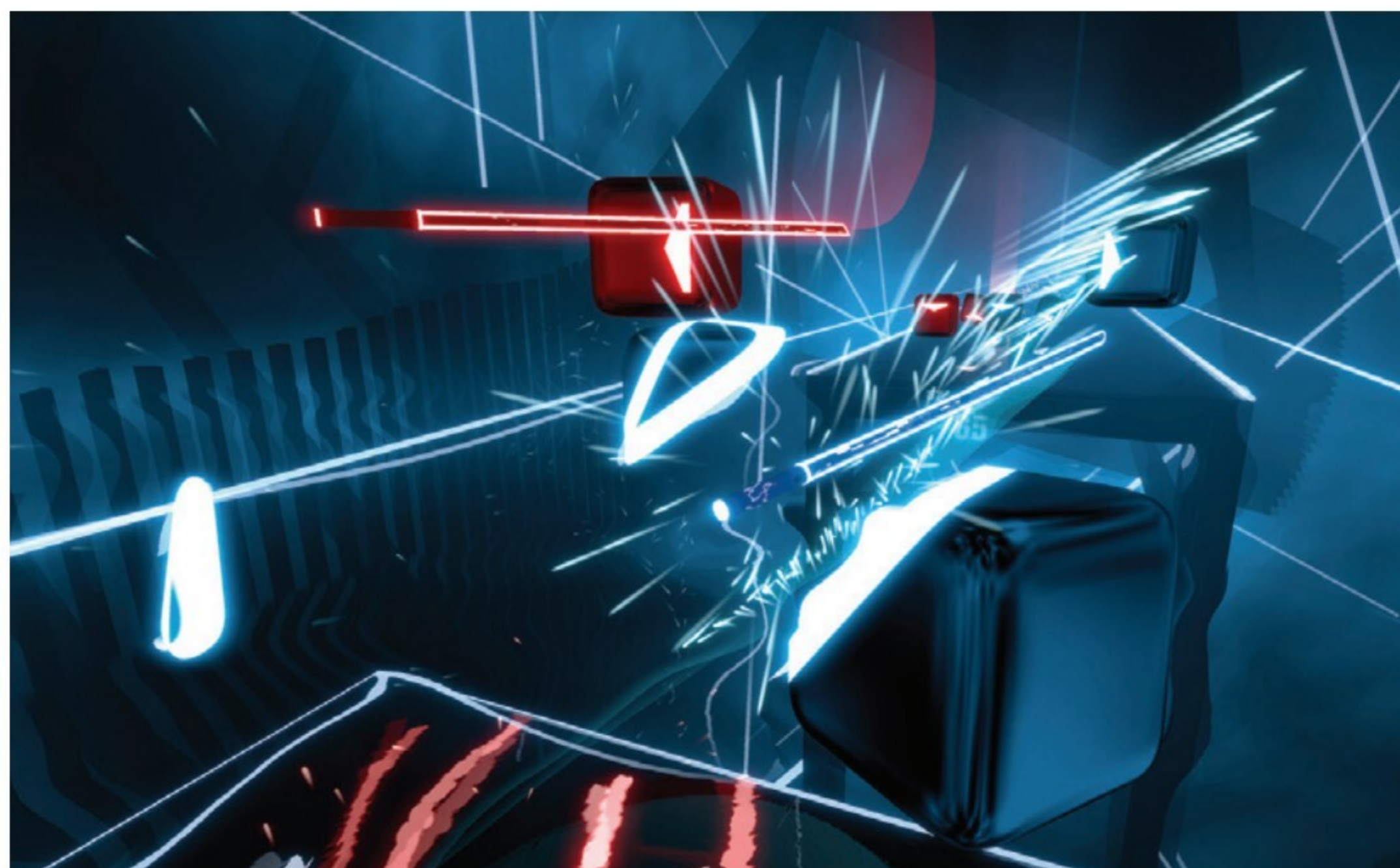
The motion controls work well, so slashing through blocks in time with the music feels fantastic

» Entertainment

Beat Saber is a blast, and one of the best experiences you can have in virtual reality. You truly feel like a musical samurai (even if you look silly to everyone watching)

» Replay Value

High





Dusk

Getting old schooled

8.75

gamenformer
SILVER

Style 1-Player Shooter (16-Player Online) **Publisher** New Blood Interactive
Developer David Szymanski **Release** December 10 **Rating** M

PC

» Concept

A faithful homage to the frantic first-person shooters of the '90s

» Graphics

These boxy environments and pixelated textures feel lifted from another era, but they look great thanks to high resolution and modern lighting effects

» Sound

The guns are loud and in-your-face, and the metal soundtrack amplifies Dusk's horror theme

» Playability

Dusk's action will sweep you away, and its small, memorable levels can be played in short bursts

» Entertainment

Fast-paced and violent action hits the ground running, but the intense horror atmosphere might turn off some

» Replay Value

Moderately high

Big-budget, triple-A experiences have never been better, but modern games have no shortage of long cutscenes and hand-holding tutorial sequences. In contrast, Dusk is a nostalgia trip that strips away modern expectations and delivers distilled FPS thrills. Dusk doesn't mess around with leveling mechanics or a sprawling narrative; it hands you a shotgun and lets you loose on a demon army. This simplicity is Dusk's greatest strength, because this no-frills shooter is an excellent crash course in basic game design.

Dusk doesn't hide its homage to '90s corridor shooters like Doom and Quake. These straightforward, boxy levels are relatively short and filled with colored keycards and hidden monster closets. But, given its graphical constraints, Dusk's environments are incredibly well-realized. Animated scarecrows stumble out of cornfields while rundown barns teem with hooded cultists and demonic goats. Each level features its own twist on folk horror, seemingly inspired by films like *The Wicker Man* and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. With sparing detail, Dusk establishes an ominous tone that completely sucked me in from level one.

One of the biggest reasons to explore every nook and cranny of Dusk's short levels is to gain access to powerful

weapons. Early on, I fell in love with dual-wielding shotguns, but another favorite go-to became the rivet gun, which fires off super-heated construction rivets that explode like miniature missiles. Unlike many classic FPS games, I constantly rotated through Dusk's arsenal thanks to each weapon's specialization. For example, the hunting rifle is a long-range tool that packs an incredible punch, while the crossbow fires magical green arrows that rip through multiple enemies and even fire through walls. Each weapon is incredibly satisfying, and thanks to an ample supply of ammo scattered on the ground, my magazines rarely ran dry.

Mastering Dusk's arsenal is important, because the action is frantic. Every firefight feels like a dance as you rotate through insanely powerful weapons and strafe dozens of incoming foes. Most enemies do little more than stand and shoot or run straight at you, but given the sheer number of foes and the fact that different projectiles move at varying speeds, I was constantly on my toes. Dusk is a shooter with no reloading, no cover, and no nonsense, so every skirmish is an absolute thrill ride.

Dusk's intensity also pairs well with its oppressive atmosphere. You rarely have time to think about the horrors you've witnessed because the game

is continually tossing enemies at you and letting you burn off that nervous energy in combat. Dusk is at once nerve-racking and cathartic.

After you finish the extensive single-player campaign, you can jump online for 16-player multiplayer mayhem. While the online action remains fast-paced, deathmatch is the only multiplayer mode, and it only has a handful of interesting maps. I had no trouble jumping into online matches, but I did have trouble getting a full 16-player match going. An in-game link to a community Discord channel helps coordinate play sessions, but this feels like papering over a problem rather than providing reliable and robust match-making. Given online multiplayer's lack of options and intentional lack of progression, this mode feels more like a novelty. Fortunately, the single-player campaign is more than worth the price of admission.

The first-person shooter has evolved a great deal since Doom popularized the genre in 1993, but, in spite of 25 years of innovations, Dusk proves that many of the old tricks still work incredibly well. Dusk might look and feel like a Quake mod, but it's so polished it feels modern. Anyone with even a hint of nostalgia in their bones for classic shooters should dive headfirst into Dusk.

» Ben Reeves



Artifact

Analytical adventure



Style 1 or 2-player Online Strategy Publisher Valve Developer Valve Release November 28 Rating T

8.5

PC

» Concept

Take on other players with characters from the Dota universe in card duels and tournaments

» Graphics

With so many different aspects of the interface and cards competing for space, the graphics and art don't stand out

» Sound

Great voice acting conveys what's happening on the battlefield, including numerous contextual hero-specific and situational quips

» Playability

Artifact is complex and can be incredibly daunting, especially for genre newcomers. Expect to put some time in learning

» Entertainment

For card-game enthusiasts, Artifact is an intense, clever conflict that offers a continually shifting board where hundreds of micro decisions lead to eventual victory or defeat

» Replay Value

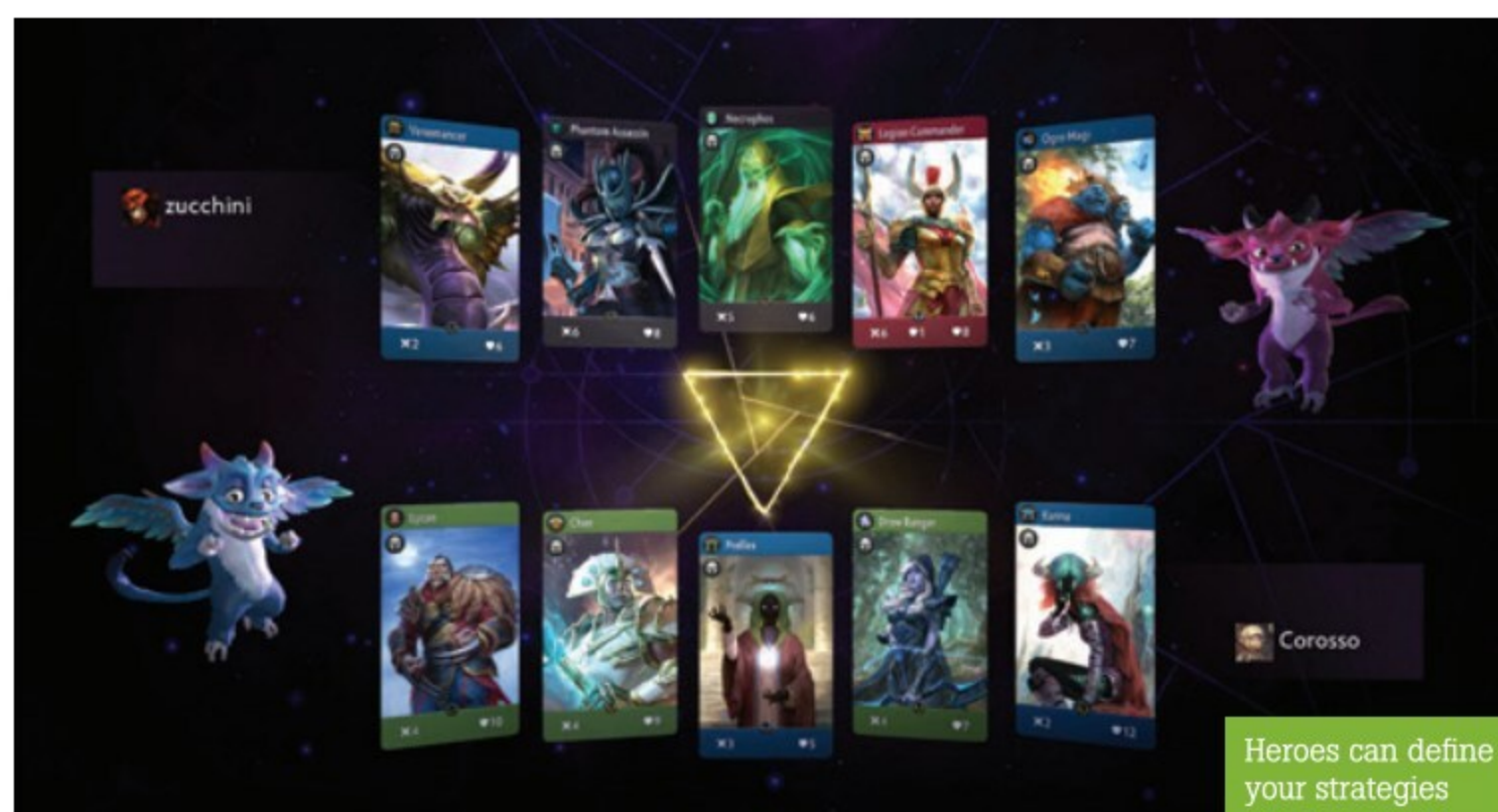
High

Valve's Artifact was announced to mixed reactions at the Dota 2 International tournament in 2017. Artifact apparently signaled Valve's return to active game development, but it is different from the studio's signature series like Half-Life and Portal. Instead, Artifact is card game set in the world of Dota, and it is designed by Richard Garfield, the creator of Magic: The Gathering. While Artifact is different from Dota 2's team-based gameplay, much of the flavor and mechanics translate well into the three-lane game. If there's one big similarity between the two Valve titles, it's that some time and dedication are required to learning, understanding, and enjoying the game.

The easiest way to explain Artifact is that you're playing three different games simultaneously with a single hand, and you need to use those cards to win two out of the three games (or win one of the games twice). Success is all about management and position; you need to make hundreds of decisions in a single game on both micro and macro levels. It's overwhelming at first, but after many hours of play and mastery of the systems at work, the satisfaction of executing a perfectly timed game-winning move is immense. On the surface, Artifact appears to be a tangled web of randomness with so many aspects being left to chance, but corralling those variables and subtly working with the tide of each game creates an atmosphere unlike any other digital card game.

Everything hinges on your heroes. Your deck must contain five heroes, and they come with associated cards (Dota fans will recognize flavorful skills and abilities, but no previous Dota experience is required). These cards play well with the hero's stats and passive or active skill. For instance, one of the most powerful heroes in the game, Axe, doesn't even have a passive. Axe is just a big pile of stats, and his card lets you have a red hero (like Axe) fight everything around him. As a red hero, Axe loves to fight and is more than a match for other heroes and creeps, so this is exactly where you want him, pummeling enemies into submission in direct combat with superior size.

Constructed play takes a backseat to draft with the initial launch set. The metagame is already well established, and while things could shift, powerful "best in every deck" heroes offer little flexibility for creative deckbuilding. Draft is another story and is the best

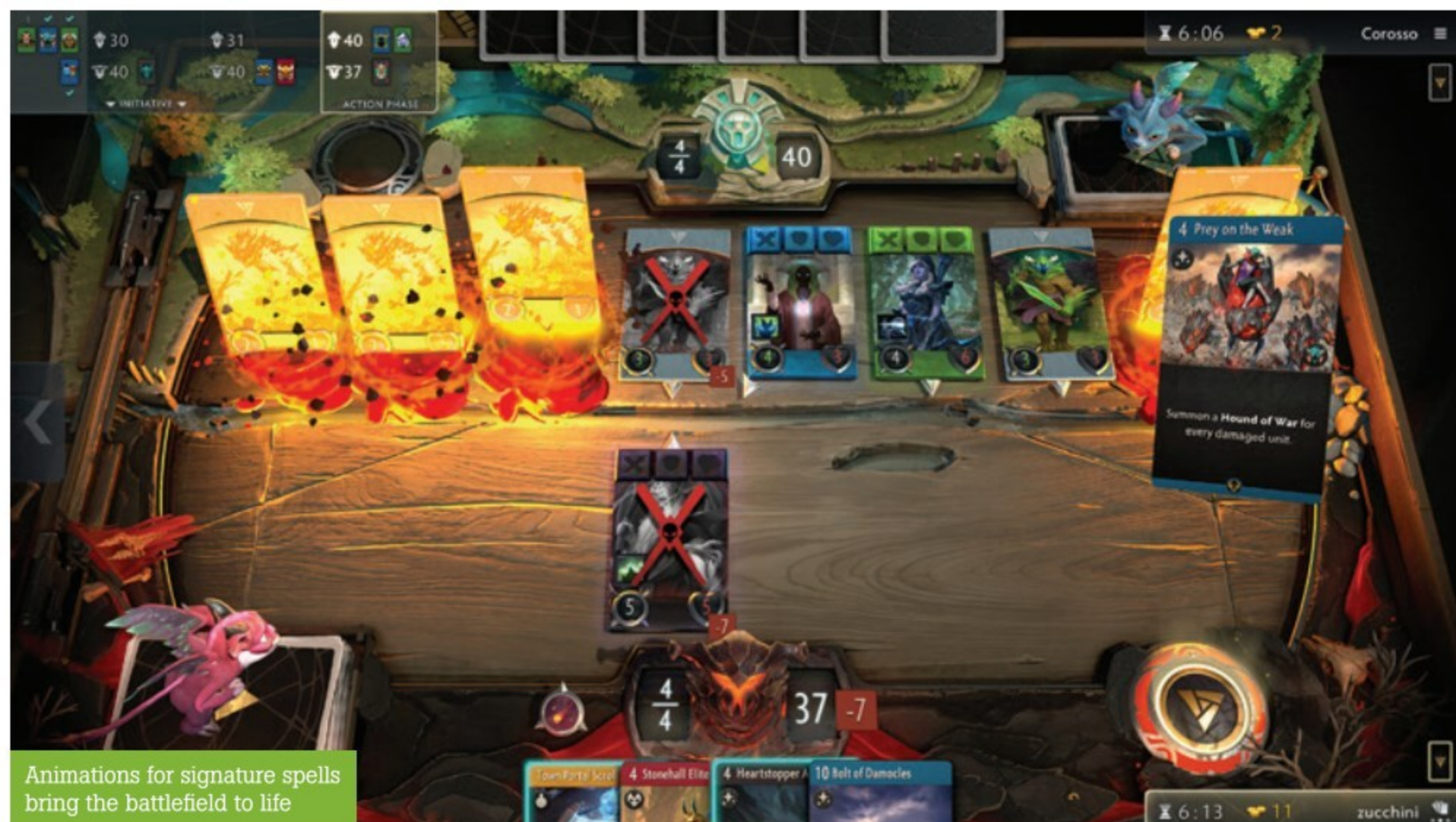


format available, allowing players to pick two cards out of packs until they create a full deck and take it into a string of battles. I hope the constructed format becomes more interesting as new heroes come into the game, but for now draft absolutely puts it to shame.

Players can play in free events with preconstructed Valve decks, free constructed/drafts with friends or random global players, and paid tournaments. Unlike many other digital card games, currently there are no progression systems or ways to earn cards outside of purchase. All trades are made on the Steam market via buying and selling, so you can pick up exactly what you're looking for, but you won't be getting any free cards if you're wanting to build a collection. In this way Artifact feels like it's hampered by an archaic physical card-game model in the digital realm. While it's not explicitly pay-to-win,

it's absolutely pay-to-competitive and collect, and this feels restrictive – especially since you're already paying a fee to purchase the game initially. Much can be said about psychological hooks that other digital card games employ to keep people playing and grinding, but at least there's an option to acquire cards slowly in those models. Here, you're paying to engage in anything meaningful. Period. And it doesn't feel good.

Artifact pulls a ton of flavor from Dota 2, but it's not necessarily a game for Dota 2 players. Artifact is instead a highly cerebral game of push and pull, an intense game of resource allocation and randomization management. Artifact is absolutely not for everyone, but it excels at creating a crazy strategy cocktail pulling from every bottle on the shelf. For card-game fans, Artifact is not to be missed. » **Daniel Tack**



Super Smash Bros. Ultimate

A raucous clash reunion

9.5

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GOLD

Style 1 to 8-Player Fighting (4-Player Online) Publisher Nintendo
Developer Bandai Namco, Sora, Ltd. Release December 7 Rating E10+

Switch

» Concept

Gather together the most comprehensive collection of brawlers and stages in the (ahem) ultimate celebration of all things Smash

» Graphics

The action looks great as it whips by, but entering camera mode lets you fully appreciate the astonishing amount of visual detail. It's too bad World of Light's map didn't get the same attention

» Sound

Hundreds upon hundreds of songs pulled from iconic Nintendo franchises and obscurities, makes this a retro fan's dream, plus some fun third-party cuts

» Playability

The Switch's tiny thumbsticks aren't the best way to play. Fortunately, plenty of alternatives (including the mighty GameCube controllers) are available

» Entertainment

A wealth of tweaks and new additions like the World of Light campaign help to keep Ultimate from feeling like a greatest-hits retread

» Replay Value

High

From its humble Nintendo 64 beginnings, Super Smash Bros. has been a delightful neutral zone for players looking for top-tier competition as well as friends who just want to kick back and watch Princess Peach knock the stuffing out of Bowser. Super Smash Bros. Ultimate is the culmination of everything that's come before, offering a massive roster of classic characters and stages and subtle additions that make the game feel fresh. Whether you haven't played Smash since your dorm-room days or you breathlessly await each new entry, Ultimate is not to be missed.

One reason why the Smash Bros. series has been so successful is that it's one of those games where the old "easy to learn, difficult to master" cliché applies. In that way, Ultimate maintains its reputation as being one of the best party games around. It's a great equalizer, with characters that are recognizable, memorable, and above all else, fun to play. Ultimate adds some new

faces to the proceedings, like Animal Crossing's Isabelle, Metroid's Ridley, and the Inklings from Splatoon. I like seeing some new blood (even if it's never spilled), but none of the new ones fully clicked with me. Isabelle comes closest, feeling like a fresh variation on Villager, but I kept getting drawn back to my old mainstays including returning favorite Pichu.

Ultimate's new World of Light solo mode wisely doesn't try to shoehorn platforming elements or push too far beyond the core of what Smash does best. Instead, you navigate a large map and take on themed challenges. The gimmick – and it's a pretty good one – is that you're freeing the spirits of characters who have fallen to a mysterious force. The spirits represent a vast array of characters from the world of gaming, the majority of whom aren't represented as playable heroes in the roster. For instance, one spot on the map might have you saving a goron chief from Ocarina of Time, a.k.a.

a giant, tan-furred Donkey Kong. Or a battle against Snorlax might have newcomer King K. Rool taking on the role of the slumbering Pokémon. Basically, imagine the playable cast cosplaying a wide array of other gaming characters. I spent dozens of hours in the mode, and I was continuously surprised by how creative the developers got in finding doppelgangers for these matches.

Once liberated, the spirits are added to your roster and provide buffs for your hero. Exploring the World of Light can be a little tough at the start, but by methodically battling across the map I slowly accrued gear that made me feel like I was gaming the system in the best possible way. Battles aren't quite as scary when you have spirits that counteract the burning effects of a stage's lava hazards and also give you a powerful weapon or regenerating health at the start of the match. You can train your spirits in dojos and send them on expeditions, too, leveling them up for more power and adding yet another fun twist.





The roster features more than 70 different characters, and unlocking them normally takes a while



Your collection of spirits can also migrate over to classic Smash modes, which further transforms the game. You want to use two final smashes with every activation? How does an extra jump sound? I've always enjoyed the barely contained chaos that Smash brings, so these extra enhancements are welcome. If the spirits seem like too much, plenty of other under-the-hood tweaks can customize the experience. The most noteworthy addition is creating and saving your own custom rule sets, which are then surfaced on the main Smash menu. As someone who only plays matches with stock lives, this fixes a small but longstanding issue. Now I can dive into matches at the press of a button instead of having

to fiddle around with menus. Another cool new option is the ability to earn final smashes by filling a meter instead of breaking the smash ball. It changes the tenor of matches, since players can focus on their opponents as opposed to the floating object.

Single-player is better than ever, but solely playing against the CPU is a sad existence. Unsurprisingly, Ultimate's multiplayer component shines. Local play is great, with up to eight players fighting at once (or even more, though not simultaneously, with the return of tournament play). If you don't have the controllers for that kind of gathering or your Smash crew has scattered over the years, online is a viable alternative. The four-way matches fill up quickly, though it falters where it actually matters. The framerate and overall stability is inconsistent, which is frustrating in a game that depends so heavily on reaction time. I had more than a few otherwise-preventable deaths after the game hiccupped as I was on my way back to terra firma. Ultimately, however, Smash is best played with your friends piled into the same space, where you can shout, cheer, and taunt with impunity at every close match.

Once all the characters are unlocked, the character-select screen is a magnificent thing to behold, with every character from the previous games present. However, getting them to show up is another thing entirely. When you start, you're given eight measly heroes to choose from. It's a seemingly clever

nod to the modest starting roster from the Nintendo 64 game that started it all. Once I was done chuckling at the familiar lineup, the realization that I was going to have to unlock more than 60 remaining characters set in. New faces pop in whether you're playing regular matches with friends, classic battles against A.I., or in the World of Light mode, but it's an unnecessarily tedious and antiquated process.

Ultimate is a tremendous package overall, including just about everything a Smash fan could want. Sure, there are a few omissions; the lack of a home-run challenge hurts, and I would have loved to see an updated take on the Poké Floats stage (or the ability to create my own). The biggest fault in this close-to-comprehensive collection is perhaps the flipside of one of its strengths: For all the new things it brings, it's all very familiar. As fun as they are to play, the handful of new characters don't have the same pop of novelty that past additions have delivered. It's a solid lineup, just not one that's especially surprising beyond its overall scale.

Super Smash Bros. Ultimate isn't dramatically reinventing the franchise, but that's all right with me; it's a refinement of what's come before. Some of my favorite gaming moments have centered on Smash, and it's great to have a solid new anchor for moments yet to come – even if it means getting knocked into oblivion by a snoozing Jigglypuff every once in a while.

» **Jeff Cork**



Incineroar is one of the new fighters, and he brings a fiery attitude to battles



The skill tree lets you tweak characters, but you can turn these buffs off if you find they make World of Light too easy



7.5 Mutant Year Zero: Road To Eden

Platform PC **Release** December 4 **Rating** N/A

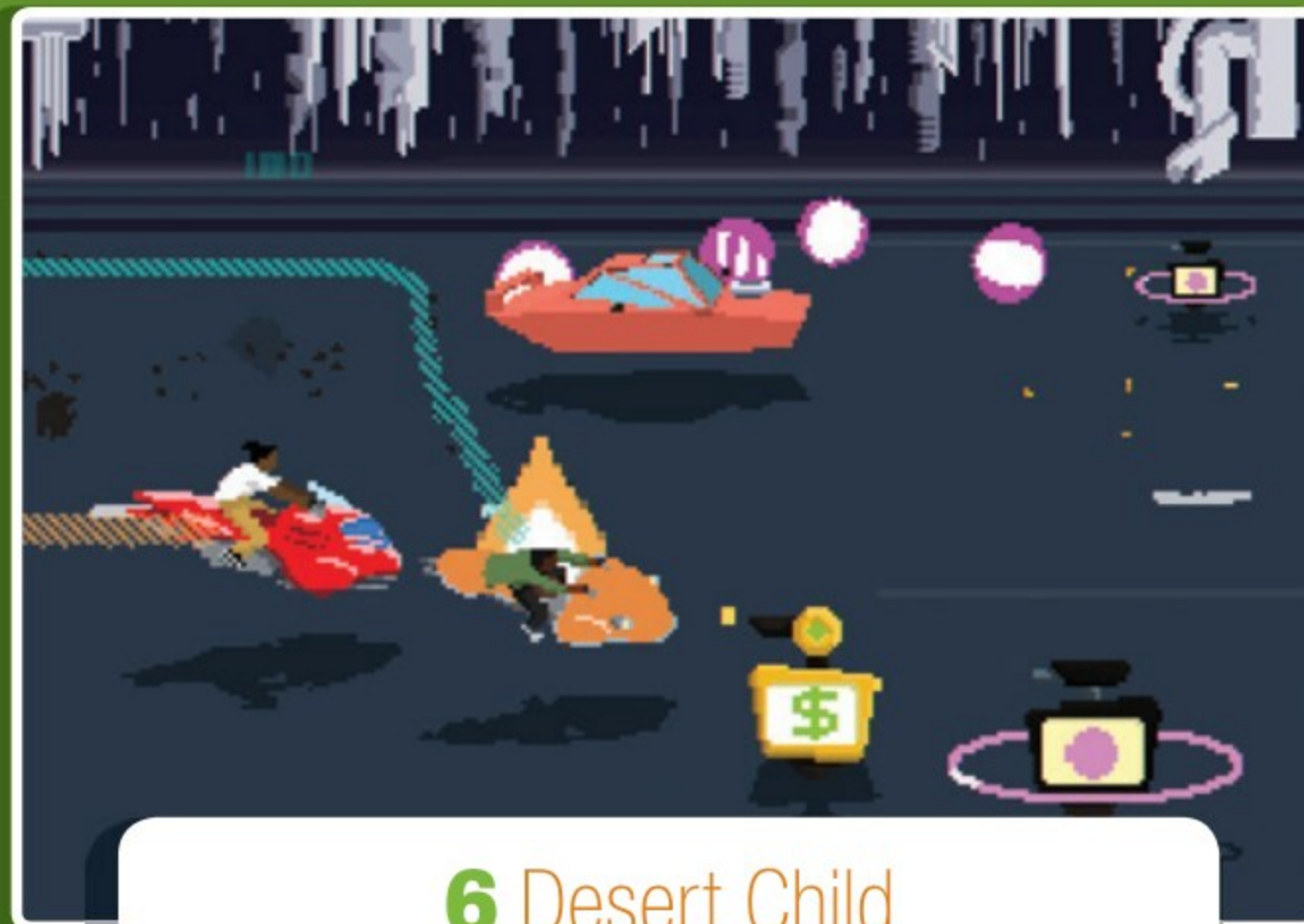
From a gameplay perspective, Mutant Year Zero is a bold but brief experiment in the turn-based genre that largely pays off. Despite my complaints, I still enjoyed it, and I'd love to see more from the franchise. If you can stomach a huge letdown of an ending, the cleverly orchestrated combat and unique world are worth checking out. — Jeff Marchiafava



6.5 The Council

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Release December 4 **Rating** M

The Council's bad graphics, voice acting, and load times didn't bother me as much as its problematic narrative. What's the point of having choice and consequence when you don't care about the story you're inhabiting? — Kimberley Wallace



6 Desert Child

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
Release December 11 **Rating** M

The slow struggle to amass wealth is an unconventional subject for gaming, and Desert Child conveys it well. However, when it comes to providing fun and depth, this stylish title doesn't make it across the finish line. — Joe Juba

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DOUBLE DRAGON

The forgotten bad video game movie

Double Dragon was a phenomenon when it hit arcades in the late '80s. Light on story and big on martial-arts combat, it tasked a pair of brothers with saving a damsel in distress, eventually forcing them to turn on each other. The game inhaled quarters and received numerous ports to home consoles, and at some point, its film rights were purchased. Even with a group of promising writers, the film didn't turn out well due to an inexperienced director and a collection of producers who didn't know what they wanted.

by Kyle Hilliard

Double Dragon the movie released in 1994 and takes place in the far-flung future of 2007. It imagines an apocalyptic Los Angeles ravaged by earthquakes where the cops control the day and gangs based on assorted themes like "clowns" or "the postal service" rule the night. Robert Patrick, only a few years removed from his memorable turn as the T-1000 in *Terminator 2*, plays Koga Shuko – a villain obsessed with recovering the second half of a powerful ancient Chinese talisman which grants incredible magical powers. Martial artist

brothers Billy (Scott Wolf) and Jimmy Lee (Mark Dacascos) must protect the talisman, teaming up with progressive gang leader Marian (Alyssa Milano) in order to keep it out of Shuko's hands. Despite the popularity of the source material, the film was a huge flop. Its *Rotten Tomatoes* score sits at an abysmal eight percent, and box office estimates point to a gross of \$2.3 million... on a \$7.8 million budget.

James Yukich was not a first-time director when he agreed to make *Double Dragon*, but it was his first time

directing a feature film. Before that he had mostly directed TV, music videos, and assorted concert films. "I very rarely ever think about the film at this point – for any number of reasons," Yukich says with a laugh.

Despite the poor critical and commercial reception of the film, the talent associated with it is impressive. The original script was written by Paul Dini, who later worked on *Batman: The Animated Series* and is the co-creator of Harley Quinn. Yukich took Dini's script and brought in Michal Davis and Peter Gould to expand on it. Davis wrote and directed 2007's *Shoot 'em Up* and Gould would later become a producer on *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*. Mark Brazil, who would co-create *That '70s Show* a few years later, took a final pass on the script to punch up and improve the dialogue. "All three writing teams were excellent," Yukich says, "It's hard to believe how it came out." Even on the production side of things you can find impressive names like Tom Karnowski, who was recently an executive producer on *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, and the special-effects team worked on movies like *Die Hard* and future Marvel titles.



Mark Dacascos (left) and Scott Wolf (right) played brothers Jimmy and Billy Lee respectively. "It was pretty weird to explain why we had an Asian guy who was brothers with a guy who didn't look Asian at all," director James Yukich says



Alyssa Milano's character Marian is arguably the strongest and most interesting character in the movie

Learning From The Super Mario Bros. Movie

When it comes to bad video games movies, *Super Mario Bros.* is the longstanding scapegoat for how wrong it can go. For *Double Dragon* director James Yukich, however, the film inspired confidence. The movie launched in the middle of *Double Dragon*'s production, and the crew went to see it. "We thought, 'We could certainly do better than this,' and I don't know that we did," Yukich says laughing. Yukich's takeaway from the film was that story and dialogue are important, and if those elements come up short (as they did in the *Super Mario Bros.* movie), then the movie will be bad. For *Double Dragon*'s producers, however, they decided the best way for them to compete would be to have more action, because that was what *Mario* was lacking.

Yukich liked working with the producers on the film, the Shah brothers and old friend Alan Schechter, who pushed him to direct, but he just couldn't get everyone on the same page. "You have to have one unified direction or it's not going to make sense, and we didn't really have one unified direction," Yukich says. "I love those guys and I think they were all fantastic, but they each had their own visions, and couldn't agree on it. I blame myself a lot for not going and saying, 'Hey, we've got to do it like this.'" In retrospect, Yukich regrets not taking a stronger stance for what he believed the film should have been. "I wish I had the experience and knowledge I do now back then."

Along with the myriad producers butting heads, there was also the complete absence of anyone related to the original property. "Never talked to them at all," Yukich says. They offered no direction or feedback on the completed film.

Yukich's biggest regret is related to the film's rating. In Yukich's mind, he was making a fun, kung-fu movie for kids. When it came back with a PG-13 rating, he was surprised, but the producers made no effort to change it. "There was really nothing in it that should have made it more than PG," Yukich says. "That caused an incredible amount of problems in terms of kids not being able to go see the film. It's a kid's film!" The movie has no blood, no true injuries, and features some very light sexual innuendo, which Yukich says he would have been happy to cut in order to acquire a PG rating, but he was never given the opportunity. Some of the producers had always intended that the movie be a cool, violent kung-fu movie. "As soon as I read the script and saw what was going on, I thought, 'This is a kid's movie. This could be a great kid's movie,'" Yukich says, and that's the movie he attempted to make. "As an adult watching the movie, I would have thought, 'This is the worst action movie I have ever seen!'"

Even before the film was complete, production had its own challenges.

A union issue shut down shooting for a month, and perhaps worst of all, was the director of photography. "The problem with Tony [Mitchell] was that he injured his back literally the second day of shooting," Yukich says. Mitchell had shot Duran Duran music videos and Tom Petty's "Don't Come Around Here No More," making him a promising addition, but he lost his balance holding a Steadicam and crashed down a hill. They tried to keep him on, even resorting to placing him on a gurney and pushing him alongside a wheeled cart holding a monitor, so he could track action shots. It just wasn't working, so a new emergency DP had to be brought in.

Overall, Yukich has fond memories of making the movie. Outside of the arguing producers, the cast and crew members had a good time, but the reception was still rough. "Oh yeah, I thought it was pretty disappointing," Yukich says. After all, he didn't get to make the film he wanted to make. "I think part of it's my fault, though, because I didn't stand up enough. It was my first film. I didn't know the politics."

Before we reached out to him, Yukich had not thought about the film in some time. He says the last time he remembers watching it was five years ago, catching it on cable. "I look at it now, and I am way happier with it now than I was then," Yukich says. "It's not as bad as I remember it being."

The film also strangely found an audience outside of the United States. "It's very big in Guam," Yukich says. During college, Yukich's son met someone from the country and when they found out their father directed *Double Dragon*, they got very excited and requested signed memorabilia, which Yukich was happy to share.

"I would love to be able to go back and do it again. I think it could have been really good," Yukich says. "There were all kinds of problems along the way, but I look back on it now and think, 'What an interesting, funny kids' movie,' and it's a shame they didn't see it when it came out." ♦



Robert Patrick is best known for playing the T-1000 in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. He, strangely, also has shape-shifting powers in *Double Dragon*



The Top

50

Games Of 2018

BY THE NUMBERS

To see how trends have evolved in the video game space, we've outlined a statistical breakdown of the games that appear on this year's list. The numbers in parentheses represent the changes over the past year.

Legend

LAST YEAR

THIS YEAR

* SERIES * ON THE LIST

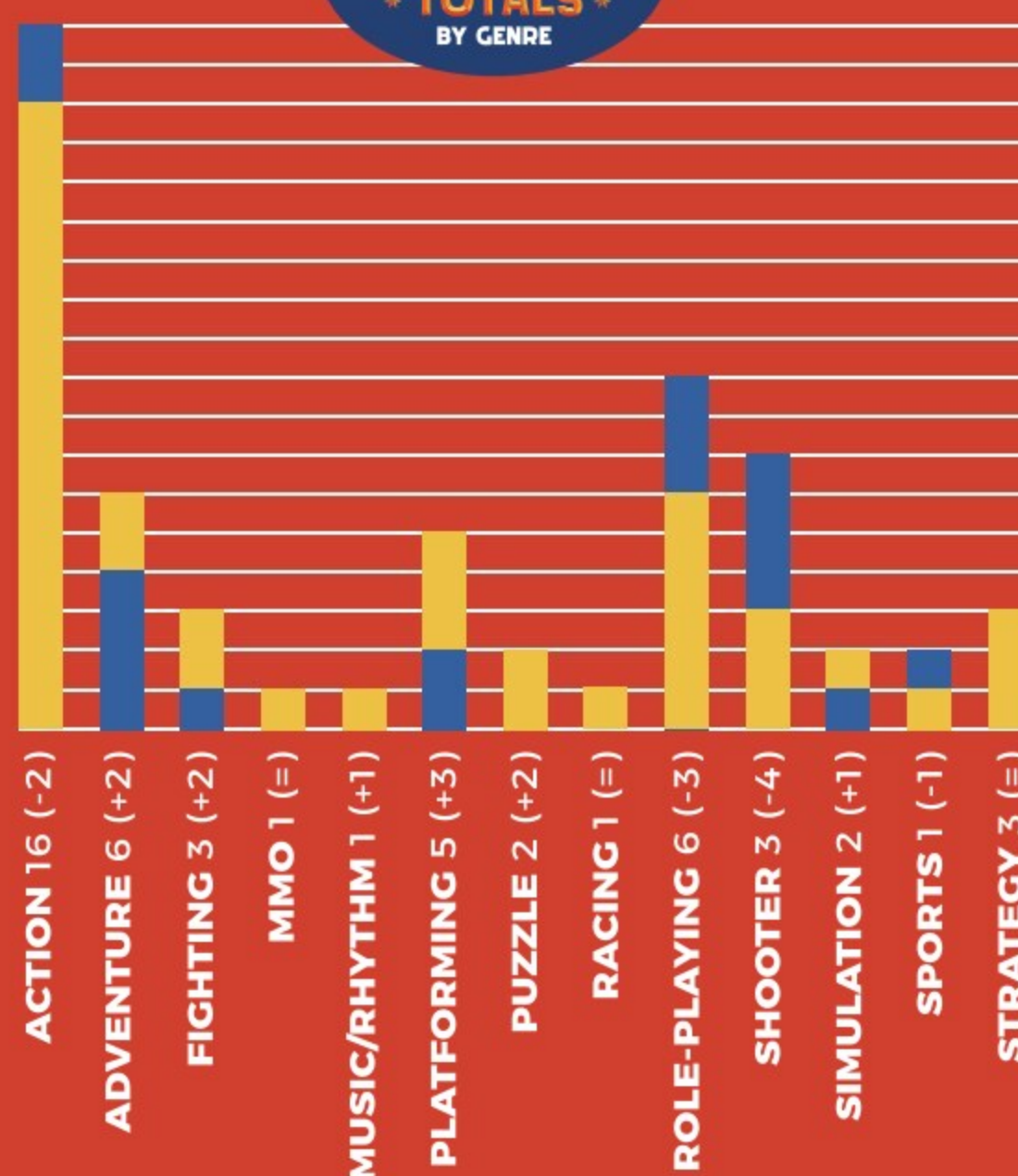
NEW
21 (+5)



RETURNING
29 (-5)



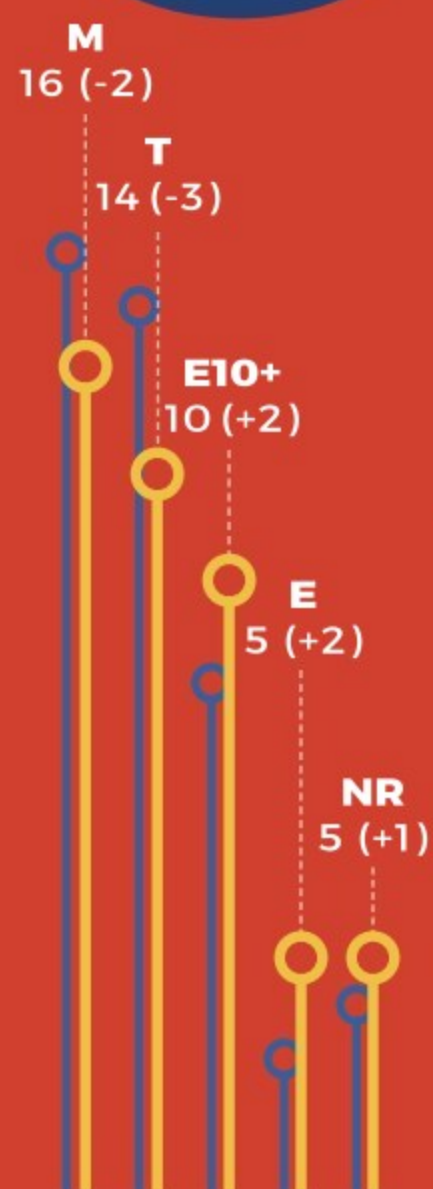
* TOTALS * BY GENRE



* TOTALS * BY PUBLISHER



* TOTALS * BY ESRB



* EXCLUSIVES * BY PLATFORM

PC/MAC/LINUX
4 (=)



XBOX ONE
0 (=)



IOS/ANDROID
1 (+1)



VR
2 (+2)



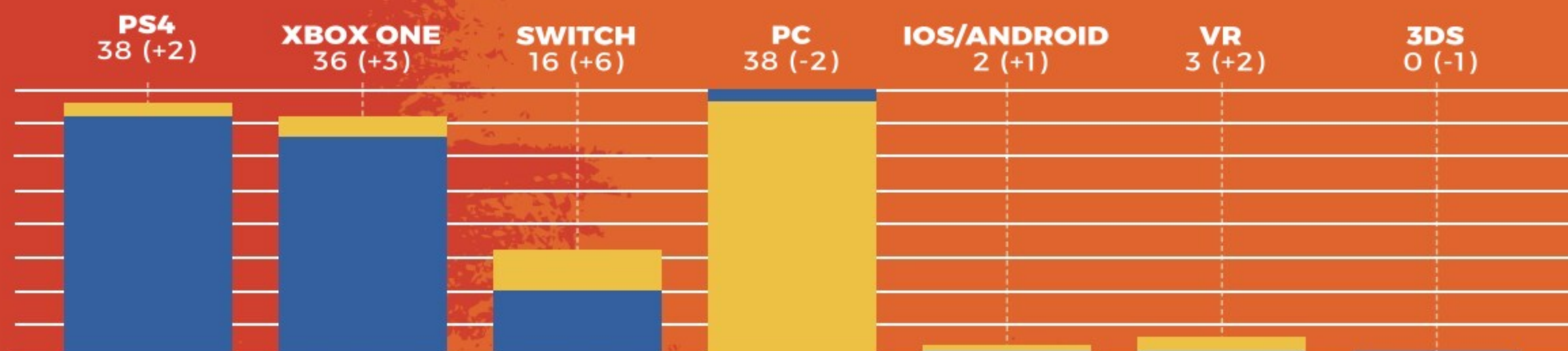
PS4
4 (+2)



SWITCH
2 (-2)



* TOTALS * BY PLATFORM





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